We Go Together

a spones zine

FIRSTS

WE GO TOGETHER ZINE

VOL. 1: ISSUE 1 | FIRSTS

FOREWORD

We Go Together: A Spones Zine is a free digital zine featuring the relationship of Spock & McCoy from Star Trek. The zine is open to fan-created Spock/McCoy content across all series, shows, movies, books, and universes. This zine is intended as a biannually released digital fanzine with one annual NSFW digital zine, and the eventual goal to provide an annual physical edition.

This zine project began in the summer of 2022 and grew to include members from all areas of Star Trek fans, all united by a common love for Spones. With the support and enthusiasm of other Spones-enjoyers and our amazing contributors, the We Go Together Zine committee is pleased to present to the first Spones-centric fanzine to be published anywhere since the Spiced Peaches Zine went inactive in 2019.

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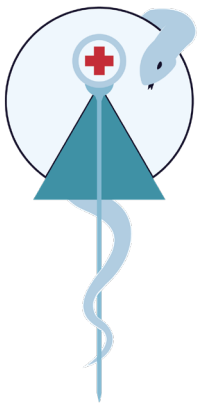
CREATIVE WORKS DISCLAIMER: Works within this zine edition may appear differently from their original submission to reflect the SponesZine style guide. Minor changes were edited as needed for clarity by our editors. Creators works are their own and credited as such.



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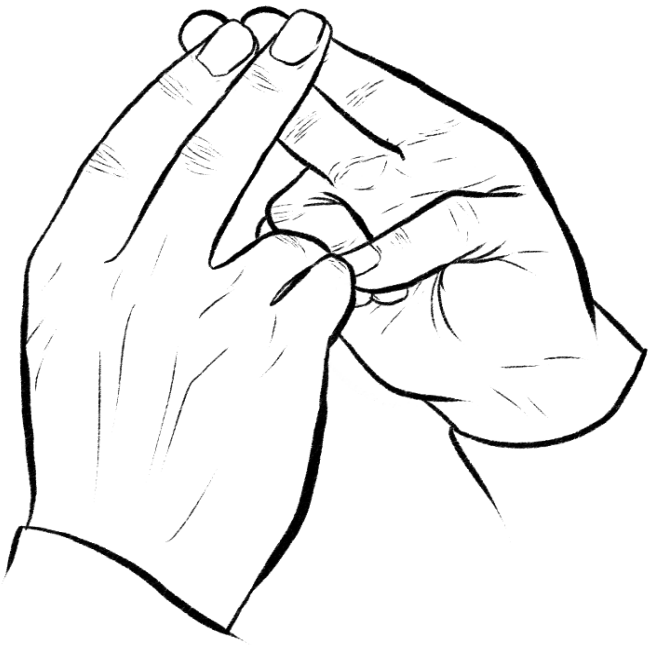
I feel your pulse when we kiss
Your heart beats in your lips
And the tips of your fingers
As they linger on my skin



I feel your soul when we touch
Every butterfly and spark
They're brilliant and gold
And keep us warm as we grow old

Your resting heart pounds
I hold it in my palm
Two-hundred fourty-two
Like when I lie alone with you

i've seen time tell tales

by Rusoe

Winters in San Francisco are wet. While the temperatures do not decrease as significantly in the colder months as they do in other areas of the North American continent, the gray fog that hangs damp and dreary over San Francisco's hills occurs even more frequently than usual, accompanied by sporadic bouts of chilly rain that can fluctuate quickly between a deluge and a drizzle.

For all the depictions of sunny beaches and blue skies that dominate the Starfleet Academy publicity posters promoting the main campus and its California location, the perpetual dry heat judged characteristic of California's southern half does not extend to its northern coastal regions, a fact that Spock found somewhat aggravating upon his first visit. It's only now, after living in San Francisco for several decades, that he has grown accustomed to its quirks.

Their residence is a brightly colored, two-story townhouse on the edge of Pacific Heights, just a quick air tram ride away from both the Academy and the Vulcan Embassy. It's perfectly convenient, but even the short commute is enough for Spock to get uncomfortably wet as he returns late one night from a rather long and tedious diplomatic dinner function. As Spock climbs up the porch stairs and activates the biometric scan to unlock the door, the warm light shining out from the bay windows tells him that his mate is already home.

Inside, the thermostat is on, raising the temperature to what would be a warm evening in ShiKahr. Already feeling more comfortable, Spock kicks off his sodden boots as soon as he crosses into the foyer—while quite fashionable on Vulcan, they had unfortunately proven to be no match for the Terran climate—and shrugs off his outer robe, taking care not to drip any water onto the hardwood floor.

He's hung the robe up on the coat rack by the entrance when a pair of arms envelop him from behind, a warm weight pressing against his back and a boney chin hooking over his shoulder.

"Welcome home."

Like a puddle evaporating in the heat of a Vulcan desert, all the tension from the day's stresses lifts from Spock's shoulders, his body needing no conscious command to relax in his

mate's embrace. He holds one hand out, index and middle fingers extended, and enjoys the warm tingle as his mate unwraps one arm from around him to match the offered digits in a quick finger-kiss.

"Have you eaten?" he asks when his mate returns to hugging him, his hold almost as firm and solid as it had been the first time, all those years ago.

"Yeah."

"Did it adequately fulfill your nutritional needs?" An annoyed huff brushes across his ear, and Spock doesn't need to look to know that his mate is rolling his eyes. "Leonard, you know that the doctor said—"

"I know, dammit, I'm a doctor too, I don't need you fussing over me all the time," Leonard interrupts, letting go of Spock and stepping back.

Slightly mourning the loss of his mate's comforting warmth, Spock turns around to meet Leonard's affronted scowl. Several potential responses come to mind, but years of experience have taught him that the most efficient way to win an argument with Leonard McCoy is to not engage in one to begin with. Therefore, instead of pointing out the fact that while the attention he pays to his patients' well-being is always exceptional, the attention that Leonard pays to his own well-being has been considerably less so, or that, as typical of his species, at over a century old, Leonard's constitution has grown rather frail, Spock keeps quiet and leans over to lay a tender kiss on Leonard's lips, letting the transmission of his love across the bond soften his mate's ire.

As expected, Leonard pushes him away and makes a scornful sound, but not before Spock feels his irritation shift into an exasperated fondness. The first time Spock had kissed Leonard as an attempt at prematurely ending an argument, it had only caused more yelling and several indignant accusations of "cheating", but with repeated usage, protests waned. Eventually it had been tacitly deemed a legitimate tactic for both sides, although sometimes the results could be rather … intense.

This time, however, Leonard only grabs Spock's wrist and turns on his heel, pulling him into the living room.

"It's raining cats and dogs out there," he grumbles, pushing Spock toward their well-worn, but still exceedingly comfortable couch. "I told you to take an umbrella. If you catch a chill, it'll be your own damn fault. Now sit down, I made that tea you like, so you'd better drink it before it gets cold."

Spock acquiesces to the orders without any further comment and watches Leonard head into the kitchen, the corner of his mouth giving the slightest amused twitch at the quiet "damn fool Vulcans" he hears Leonard mutter under his breath. At his advanced age, Leonard's movements have become slower, but his hands remain as steady as ever as he putters around the kitchen, pulling two mugs out from the cupboard and placing them on a tray alongside a porcelain Terran teapot. His hair, once a warm, soft brown before fading into lighter and lighter shades of gray, had long since grown out of the old Starfleet regulation haircut to hang loosely about his face, prompting the need to occasionally brush his bangs out of his eyes.

Fondness of the familiarity of each and every one of Leonard's actions, all his little idiosyncrasies that Spock has observed and memorized over a lifetime of cohabitation and love, hits Spock with the force of a speeder collision. At the same time, the illogical fear that has been dogging his thoughts of late, the fear of having to one day experience Leonard's passing, clutches his heart in an ice-cold vise.

Looking at the marks that time has left on his mate, it almost hurts to think of how young they had been when they met. Never the most heavyset of men, Leonard was now almost painfully thin, sometimes giving Spock the illogical impression that it would take no more than a stiff breeze to blow him over. The lines on his face had deepened, some from the stress of the bitter difficulties they had faced, and others from the smiles and laughter of the joys they'd had. He also frequently looked tired, and no longer went on as many social outings as he had before Jim's tragic death.

Losing Jim had been painful enough; Spock cannot imagine what it will be like to lose Leonard too—but then Leonard turns, tray in hand, and Spock is brought out of his spiraling thoughts by the bright, piercing blue of Leonard's eyes, just as full of passion and life as they had been the first time they met—an initially unremarkable meeting that had quickly become anything but as they argued in the transporter room of the *USS Enterprise*.

Yes, it is premature to think of the end now, not when Leonard is still so alive, not when they still easily have at least a few decades left together.

Leonard places the tray on the coffee table in front of the couch and hands Spock a steaming mug, settling down beside him with a mug of his own. The scent of Vulcan spice tea fills the air as Spock sips at the warm beverage, once again enjoying the press of Leonard's body against his.

"Nothing like a hot drink to cure a rainy day," Leonard says with a contented sigh, leaning his head against Spock's shoulder.

Through the bond, Spock feels a veritable tidal wave of *peace*, *joy*, *love*, pour into him until he is overflowing with it, its warmth sinking into the depths of his bones. He cannot stop the smile that crosses his face then, would not want to even if he could, and turns his face to press his nose into the soft strands of hair tickling his neck.

They hardly ever verbally express their affection and regard for each other. The emotions involved are complex and deep in a way that they are both more comfortable communicating wordlessly with melds or the bond, but right now, Spock wants to try something a little different, a little new.

"On the contrary, I believe your company is a more effective remedy."

Leonard chokes on his tea and shoots upright, fixing Spock with an incredulous glare. "Good lord, that was cornier than a field in Iowa, you sure you ain't feeling sick?"

Spock schools his face into the flattest expression he can. "I am fine. I simply was expressing an observation I had made. Naturally, without sufficient data points, it is impossible to make any definitive conclusions, but I hypothesize that these findings will be highly reproducible."

"Yeah? Well I'm observing that certain Vulcans seem to get illogically sentimental in their old age," Leonard grumbles, but the flush on his face tells Spock that he's secretly pleased. A satisfactorily successful result.

They sit, sipping at their drinks in silence, when Leonard finally half-mumbles a quiet, grudging, "You make me happy too."

And, as the San Francisco rain starts up again with a vengeance, pattering loudly against the roof and windows of this little home they've made together, Spock thinks of all the moments he and Leonard have shared with nothing but a pure, grateful affection, resolving to cherish every new moment that is still undoubtedly yet to come.

★✚★✚★

So, you're dating. That's a big surprise to all of us. No more foreplay fights on the bridge, please.
- Bridge Crew
sleepymccoy '24

face the music

by remylebae

It's busier in Recreation Room 1 than usual, and to get to where Scotty is sitting and holding a seat for him at the bar, Leonard has to squeeze past a whole gaggle of giggling officers, all of them barely old enough to drink.

"Didn't know we were running a daycare in here tonight," Leonard mutters, but he grins when Scotty lets out a hearty laugh.

"I s'pose they have every right to be here as we do." Scotty takes a drink, then adds, "Though wouldn't it be nice if the place could be closed off just for us old dogs?"

"Who you callin' old?" Leonard teases, playfully nudging Scotty in the side with his elbow. He leans back in his seat and flags down the bartender, then looks around the room once more. "Figures. The one night you and I are in here, it's packed."

"Oh, I thought you knew—there's an event tonight."

"An event, huh?" Leonard frowns. "What's going on? Game night? Speed dating?"

The latter would certainly explain all the young officers surrounding them now, young enough that they haven't been heartbroken and beaten down, still foolish enough to believe that there's someone out there for each of them. Leonard vaguely remembers what that was like, though it's been a long time since he's put himself out there. He definitely doesn't want to stick around here if it means being around all that hullabaloo.

He orders his drink, then says to Scotty, "Maybe we shouldn't stay here for too long. I think I've still got a bottle of Saurian brandy stashed away somewhere in my quarters that we can share."

Scotty's brow furrows. "Why, but they haven't even started yet!"

"They—?"

Leonard's voice is louder than he intended as the room abruptly goes quiet. Feeling hot with embarrassment, he swivels around, gaze searching, before he turns back to look at Scotty. "What's happening?"

Scotty gestures over Leonard's shoulder. Leonard looks where Scotty pointed, his gaze settling on a small stage that is starting to be set up for some sort of performance. Someone fiddles with a pair of microphones standing in front of two chairs, and as Leonard glances around the room, it becomes clear that all the fresh young faces are here with the sole purpose of watching … some sort of performance.

"Open-mic night," Scotty says before he can ask. "Surprised you hadn't heard about it, what with all the time you and the captain spend with Mister Spock."

Leonard looks back at Scotty and stares. "Spock?"

"Aye. Him and Miss Uhura have the first slot, then a couple of the wee bairns will take their turn—hence the crowd. They've been doing this for some weeks now, so I'm surprised you hadn't heard about it. Mister Spock's got his instrument, and the lovely lady sings—why, there they go now."

Leonard watches as Spock and Uhura climb onto the stage, settling down into the two seats. Spock holds in his arms his lute, and as Uhura adjusts the height of the microphones, Spock starts to tune it, tilting his head so that his ear is closer to the strings, listening intently to each note he plucks.

He turns back to Scotty and reaches for his drink, asking, "Do they do this that often?" as he raises the glass to his lips.

"Only every week or so."

Damn. Leonard wonders how he missed this. Does Jim know too? Hot, bitter anger starts to eat at him before he shoves it down—it's no one's fault but his own that he hasn't been paying attention to his friend's hobbies.

Leonard holds his drink in his lap, running his thumb around the rim of the glass as he focuses his attention back on Spock's lute. He's seen it before plenty of times, just never in use. Normally, it's hanging on Spock's wall, collecting dust—but not anymore. Hell, maybe that was why Spock was playing with Uhura in the first place, as a means to keep the damn thing in tune and stop it from falling into disrepair.

But Leonard found this odd. He knew the man played, but for some reason, it never occurred to him that Spock might actually …well, play. Publicly, at least.

Spock starts to strum with intent, and Uhura shifts forward in her seat. They're about to begin, so Leonard leans back, getting comfortable. He may as well stay, see how they do. If they're awful, he can always duck out early and blame his disappearance on some medical emergency.

When Uhura opens her mouth to sing, the whole room manages to get even quieter than they were moments ago when the stage was still setting up. Leonard has heard her sing before. She has a tendency to hum to herself when she's working, sings softly when she's getting herself food from the mess, jumping at the opportunity to sing with friends the moment someone breaks out the booze. Her voice is beautiful, and it draws the attention of everyone in the room with its bright, clear sound.

And yet, Leonard can't look away from Spock's hands. Yes, he's listening to Uhura, but his focus is on the notes Spock is pulling from his lute, movements precise and smooth, the motions of a well-practiced performer. Hundreds of people aboard the ship, tens of which must be talented musicians, but Uhura chose Spock to accompany her—and Leonard can now see why. They sound good together, fantastic even.

Spock doesn't smile the way Uhura does, but he's got that smug look on his face that Leonard

is oh-so-familiar with, and it's clear that even Spock knows they sound beautiful together.

The song itself is about flowers in the summertime. It's been a long time since Leonard has experienced a summer on Earth, and he allows himself a wistful smile. Southern Georgia summers are hot and humid, but he finds that he misses them from time to time.

He does not realize the song has finished until people are clapping, and sheepishly, he attempts to do the same, though it's made difficult by the drink in his hands that he has completely forgotten about. He takes a sip as Spock starts to strum the next song, turning around to place his glass back on the bar behind him.

It isn't until he's turned around that he remembers he's not alone. He opens his mouth to apologize to Scotty for forgetting that he was there, but he closes it the moment he gets a proper look at Scotty's face.

Scotty's eyes have a softness to them as he stares openly, adoringly, across the room at the stage. It doesn't take an idiot to work out who Scotty is staring so fondly at.

Leonard chuckles, nudging Scotty in the side. Scotty's cheeks go bright-red as his eyes jump from Uhura to Leonard before dropping to his lap. No wonder Scotty wanted them to get a drink in here tonight; he needed an excuse to see her sing.

Smirking, Leonard turns back to face the stage. He can tease Scotty plenty once they've left. There's no reason to be rude and talk while Uhura is singing.

"Thank you," Uhura says once that song has come to a close, and the audience politely claps. Uhura leans back, murmuring something inaudible into Spock's ear. He nods, and she leans close to the microphone once more. "This next one is a love song."

It's a lovely little tune. She sings with such confidence and with such a wide grin on her face that Leonard would bet that this was one of her favorite songs to perform. She sings, *"And in that way, he was mine. A stolen glance of shining eyes. A voice so soft and sweet as wine. Yes, from a distance, he was mine."*

Leonard hasn't heard the song before. He assumes Uhura wrote it—there's no way Spock did.

They finish that song and start on the next. Leonard has finished his drink, and while he's enjoying himself, his attention is starting to wane. There's work he should be catching up on that's waiting for him on a PADD in his quarters, and he only meant to have one drink with Scotty tonight anyway so that his mind would still be focused enough to read through some research that Chapel would be sending his way.

He's gotta find the right time to slip out, though. He doesn't want to interrupt their singing by standing up and drawing the crowd's attention his way. Maybe he should just wait for their slot to finish, or maybe—

Leonard's attention snaps forward, his breath catching in his throat as *Spock* starts to sing. It's only the backing vocals, the harmonies to a chorus that Uhura is singing the main melody of, but Leonard finds himself stilling at the sound. He hasn't heard Spock sing before- he isn't sure what he expected, but this?

Spock's voice isn't delicate and sweet like Uhura's is. It's not perfect, either. It's deep and a little gravelly, like he's not warmed up enough, like it's been too long since he's last sang and he's relearning how to sing while doing it. It's rough around the edges and not quite in tune, but in that way that Leonard's always liked. Spock's voice reminds him of those old country singers that his great granddaddy was always so fond of, sitting baby Leonard down on his lap and playing old recordings from the 20th century, or sometimes busting out his own guitar, the one

that now belongs to Leonard even though he rarely touches the thing.

It reminds him of when he was a youngin, back when home still felt like home. Leonard's throat thickens. He blinks rapidly, his face hot as he fights back the urge to cry, eyes starting to sting. He swallows hard, then swallows again, doing his damndest to keep his composure.

He keeps his eyes trained ahead, worried that if he looks back at Scotty that Scotty will clock that something's wrong. No, he can't look away from Spock, even though it feels too intimate, watching him sing and strum his lute. It's like Spock's opened his heart up for them all to see, like he's actually letting them in for once instead of closing himself off to ridiculous human things like emotions.

Spock sings again on the chorus the second and third time around. Leonard catches himself leaning forward in his seat, listening intently, as if that'll keep Spock singing for longer, like it'll stick in his memory better if he sits like this, like his brain will memorize each deep gruff note if he pays hard enough attention.

Long after the song has ended, as the next group is climbing onto the stage and tuning their instruments while Scotty's across the room chatting with Uhura, Leonard wonders how he'd gone this long without ever hearing Spock sing. It was only one song, but he's already desperate to hear Spock sing again.

★✚★✚★

After that first performance, Leonard keeps returning. He can't explain it, can't figure out what's gotten into himself, but he keeps returning to the weekly open-mic nights. He's reluctant to miss any of their performances, and a small part of him knows that it's Spock's singing that's drawing him back. Spock's lute playing is great, but it's even better to hear Spock sing.

There are nights when Spock doesn't sing at all, when the songs they've chosen for the evening do not require him to join in with Uhura. On those nights, Leonard returns to his quarters feeling disappointed, though he struggles to understand why such a small thing leaves him feeling so down.

But on those nights when Spock does sing?

Spock sings, and Leonard feels like himself again—an old version of himself, back when he was a young man who wasn't bitter and exhausted. His future was still unwritten, still bright. Spock sings and he's home again, back at his momma's house, and his father is still alive and he hasn't met Jocelyn yet. Back when he felt like he had a place in that old house, in that old town. Back when he still felt like he was allowed to call that place home.

Spock sings, and Leonard can't look away. He doesn't dare to. Occasionally, he accidentally catches Uhura's eyes, but she meets them with a flash of a smile. Spock is often focused on the music; he rarely lifts his gaze to look out at the audience. There are days when Leonard wonders if Spock is even aware that he's there, that he's been to each performance since the first one that he sat in on. He wonders if Spock would even care.

When he runs into Spock outside of the open-mic nights, he doesn't bring it up. He figures that if Spock wants to talk about it, he'll say something. The stubborn Vulcan is so private, so weird about the personal crap, and Leonard doesn't want to say the wrong thing and earn Spock's wrath just because he complimented his singing voice in front of the wrong people.

And anyway, Jim will think something's wrong with him if he's a little too friendly, too nice to Spock. Can't have the captain thinking he's ill or something and force him to get a physical.

Chapel will jump at the chance to run a slew of tests on Leonard and poke and prod him a bit too hard as payback for his being a pain in her side for the year he's been on the ship with her.

He keeps attending, making sure he gets his work done early so he doesn't miss it, or coming back in afterwards, staying up late playing catch-up.

I'm being a supportive friend, he tells himself during the fifth one he's attended. *This is what friends do.*

But even he has to admit, on some subconscious level, that friends aren't this enthralled with their friend's voices, with their friend's long, slim fingers strumming a lute. What he's doing is bordering on obsessive, and entangled with his fascination with Spock's performances is a feeling of self-loathing that's been standard fare in his life since he was a teenager, made worse by his daddy's death and all the shit that went down with Jocelyn.

Scotty's at most of them too. *See? This is normal*, Leonard thinks, as if there's someone listening in on his thoughts trying to argue otherwise, even though the only person he's gotta convince is himself.

The difference, of course, is that Scotty doesn't make them all. It's harder for him to take a few hours off as chief engineer—it seems like there's always something going on with the ship's warp core or faulty wiring in one of the replicators in the mess right when peak dinner hours are. Leonard's lucky he's got Chapel and Doctor M'Benga, lucky that his sickbay is (usually) well-staffed enough that he has the ability to make time for this.

He sits there for the seventh time, sipping some sparkling water because he's got work to catch up on when this is done. He's heard their entire repertoire at this point, can hum most of their tunes—he even caught himself singing under his breath as he was checking through inventory yesterday morning, but he put a stop to that the moment he realized what he was doing, not wanting Chapel to overhear and tease him. So when Spock leans over into Uhura's ear and whispers something and Uhura's brows raise, a grin stretching across her lips before she nods, Leonard leans forward in his seat, figuring whatever they're about to play ought to be new.

Uhura says into the microphone, "This is a love song," and Leonard frowns, hiding his disappointment in a long sip of his drink. The song is pretty, but they sing it every time. It's the one he's most familiar with by now, one that only Uhura sings.

Spock's eyes fall shut in concentration as he starts to play, as they tend to do. Leonard thinks it's a pity. Spock's got such beautiful eyes.

He finishes off his sparkling water, then waves down the bartender for a refill, silently nodding his thanks. Once the song is over, he'll—

Leonard stills, his head snapping to face front. Spock has started to sing. Spock never sings on this song.

"*And in that way, he was mine. A stolen glance of shining eyes. A voice so soft and sweet as wine.*" Spock lifts his gaze. His eyes lock with Leonard's, and Leonard's heart thunders in his chest. Spock smiles.

Leonard is barely listening as Spock finishes the chorus with, "*Yes, from a distance, he was mine.*"

And then Spock's eyes fall shut once more, fingers still strumming. Leonard can barely follow along, mouth agape, eyes jumping between Spock and Uhura and the rest of the room, wondering if anyone else noticed how Spock's eyes seemed to stare directly into him. Uhura's eyes meet his, giving him an appraising look, and Leonard smiles, a little too wide, a little too

forced, but she smiles back, her eyes breaking off to settle on someone else in the crowd.

Leonard exhales heavily, bringing a hand to his face. His cheeks are warm, and he realizes belatedly that he must be blushing.

The bartender places his new sparkling water beside him and Leonard reaches for it shakily. He takes a long sip and forces himself to take in a steadying breath. His heart is still racing—why won't it stop racing?

He stands up once they're done performing, making his way towards the doors. His hasty retreat is slowed by a group of officers socializing right in his path, and he is unable to step around them. When they finally do move out of his way, he almost runs directly into Uhura.

"Oh! Doctor McCoy, are you alright?" she asks. He must look all out of sorts right now if Uhura is asking that after a quick glance at him.

"I'm fine," he says hurriedly. "You uh, sounded lovely. As per usual."

He himself sounds flustered, and he grimaces. He can't look at Spock, who lingers to the side of Uhura, right at the edge of Leonard's peripheral vision.

"Thank you, Doctor," Uhura replies, though her eyes search his face for something. He silently begs her to let him go so he can leave before he ends up accidentally looking at Spock. He's certain that such an interaction would make even the tips of his ears go pink.

"I've gotta get going. There's work to be done in sickbay, you know how it is."

"Of course, Doctor. Thanks for coming."

Spock is eerily quiet. Leonard thinks this is almost worse than if Spock had actually spoken to him.

Once he's left, he rushes back to sickbay and throws himself into his work. He doesn't let himself think about what happened back there, doesn't let himself think about Spock's eyes staring him down, or god, Spock's smile. No, he doesn't let himself think about any of that at all.

★✚★✚★

He does his best to forget that that moment ever happened in the weeks that follow. He keeps attending, and while Spock sings occasionally, it's nothing like that one time. Leonard isn't sure whether he feels relieved or disappointed about that.

It's an early morning. He's got time for a quick breakfast in the mess, and he sips his coffee as he waits for the replicator to finish preparing his eggs. The damn thing never gets the texture right, but it's better than nothing.

He finds a table in the corner even though the mess is virtually empty, then scarfs his eggs down as quickly as he can. They only taste edible when they're still hot.

His plate is nearly clean when he spots Uhura approaching him. She isn't dressed in her uniform yet, wrapped instead in a shiny satin robe and wearing sandals on her feet. Her makeup looks smudged like it's been slept in; she must be hungry if she's left her quarters before showering and dressing for duty.

She stops on the other side of his table. "Doctor McCoy, you're just the man I wanted to see!"

"I am?"

She nods, then waves a hand at the seat across from him. "May I?"

"Go right ahead," he replies, and she sits down. It's quiet for a moment, and it stretches on long enough that Leonard starts to feel uncomfortable. Leonard looks around the empty mess,

wetting his lips. "Well, uh, you're up early."

She smiles, just slightly. "A little. I don't have much time to chat before I go get ready for today."

"Right."

He reaches for his coffee and takes a long drink, glancing her way when he knows she isn't looking directly at him. She's chewing her bottom lip like there's something she wants to say, looking around them as if making sure no one is listening in—which no one is. The mess is still empty besides them and two officers who are only now wandering in and standing by one of the replicators across the room.

Leonard lowers the mug from his mouth. "What's got you all high-strung?"

Uhura straightens, eyes jumping over to look at Leonard. Her fingers are the only thing that don't go still, tapping out a rhythm against the tabletop. She sighs, leaning back in her seat. "Doctor, I don't know how to say this …"

Confusion and alarm flood his system so hard and so suddenly that he feels ill. He was not prepared to feel such strong emotions slam into him so soon after waking up. Cautiously, he asks, "Have I done something wrong?"

Uhura's expression softens. She tilts her head, her lips thinning. "No, absolutely not. It's just… well, I've noticed you, you know, coming to all my performances. I—I've noticed you staring."

"Staring?"

Uhura nods. When Leonard doesn't give her an answer other than blinking dumbly back at her, Uhura exhales heavily, shaking her head. "Doctor, you're very… Well, it's obvious what's going on here. And I want you to know that I am very touched, incredibly so, but I really don't feel the same way about you."

Leonard's mouth falls agape and he pales, staring at Uhura as she only continues to turn him down, turning down a man *that wasn't into her in the first place.* His stomach twists in knots and he swallows thickly, trying to gain back some semblance of control over his facial features.

"—which won't affect anything," Uhura says soothingly, still going. "I just wanted you to be able to—"

"I don't mean to interrupt," he says quickly. "But it's not like that, I swear."

Uhura frowns. "It's not?"

His face burns. "Absolutely not. You—you're a lovely singer, but it wasn't you I was coming to see."

"Oh!" Uhura's eyes widen and she visibly withdraws, leaning back in her chair. Then, she blinks, a flash of realization in her eyes before she grins wide. "Ohhhhh. I see now! Oh, how funny!"

"Funny?" Leonard asks weakly. He would like this conversation to end now so that he can tuck his tail between his legs and run off to sickbay to pretend like this embarrassing moment he's having never happened. "How so?"

"This whole time you were coming to see him! I had no idea you felt that way about Spock, Doctor! That explains so much!"

Leonard feels his neck and ears flush. He feels the absurd urge to let out a whimper. "That is *not* what's happening! It's not about him! Really!"

Shooting him a pointed look, Uhura snorts. "Alright, Doctor, if you say so." She pushes

herself up from her spot at the table, adjusting her robe as she adds, "Well, I'm relieved we got that all settled. I'm with Scotty now, you know. That's why—well," she pauses and gestures to her robe. "I'll leave it at that. But I really should be returning to my quarters to get ready for the day."

Leonard grimaces, relieved that Uhura isn't planning on sharing any additional details, and Uhura laughs at his reaction. "I'll see you later. Take care, Doctor!"

Leonard watches her leave, his eyes lingering on the same spot long after Uhura has disappeared from view. Then, he drops his face into his hands, groaning. How long had Uhura assumed that he was attending for her? They'd spoken many times in the weeks that he had been attending their performances; how awkward had that been for her, thinking he was falling in love with her? How long had she been preparing to approach him and turn him down?

God. He feels like a complete idiot. Does Scotty think they'd both been chasing after her? Does Spock think—

Shit.

He scoffs, drawing his hands back and staring down at his plate. The rest of his eggs have gone cold.

His eyes are stinging, but from what he's not sure. Shame? Mortification? He's not sure how he's going to be able to look at Scotty or Uhura or Spock ever again.

He stands up and throws his eggs away, scrubbing his face with his hands. What a goddamn mess he's gotten himself into, all because he wanted to hear his friend sing. *Friends* sing. Dammit.

What did Uhura even know? She wasn't in his head. She didn't know what he was actually feeling. If he's being completely honest with himself, he doesn't even know what he's feeling, not completely.

He starts his walk to sickbay, keeping his pace slow so that he can keep thinking as he walks. He's … fond of Spock, sure. He enjoys their conversations a lot and their fights even more, but that's not *affection* is it? This feeling, whatever it is, it's not a crush.

"Doctor! A word?"

Leonard's head snaps around, eyes going wide as the last person he wants to see right now walks briskly to catch up with him. Leonard swallows thickly, giving Spock a nod once Spock has reached him. "Sure, Spock. What's up?"

Spock draws his shoulders back, clasping his hands together behind his back. He continues walking, and Leonard follows along, keeping pace with him. "I wish to speak to you about Lieutenant Besasi. As their commanding officer, it is my duty to let you know when I have reason for concern. I ask that you reach out to them and request that they visit sickbay for a physical."

Leonard frowns. "That bad, huh? What's got you so worried?"

"I am not *worried*," Spock says, though the way his brow knits together says otherwise. "But I have noticed a decrease in the quality of their work in the science lab. They have been favoring their right hand instead of their left, and the left causes them pain when they do use it, as evidenced by reactions I have noticed while supervising them. While at first I felt it was not my place to comment on the matter, they have been ignoring the issue for far too long."

Leonard hums contemplatively. "Well, I'll make sure to call them sometime today. Thanks for letting me know, Spock—and I won't tell them that you were the one who got them reported for a physical."

They reach the entrance to sickbay and come to a stop. Spock locks eyes with Leonard and tilts his head. He softly smiles, and Leonard's stomach does somersaults. "Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate your help."

It isn't until Spock has walked away that Leonard realizes he had been holding his breath. He leans against the corridor wall as he exhales heavily, squeezing his eyes shut with a whimper. Shit. Shit shit *shit*. He can't feel this way about Spock, he *can't*. It's been years since he's had a silly crush, dammit! He's too old for this!

His face feels hot and his hands strum at his sides, anxiety leaving him with excess energy. Chapel can read him like an open book. There's no way he's stepping inside of sickbay until he's got his nerves at least somewhat under control.

He likes Spock. God, how is he supposed to do his job after such a revelation? And what *about* Spock? How is he supposed to ever be in the same room as the man ever again? There's another open-mic tonight and there's no way he can actually attend unless he wants to sit there, face burning and acting like a fool the entire time.

Leonard straightens, looking down the corridor. He's still alone; thank god no one caught him having a minor freak out.

Putting on a brave face, he slips into sickbay, managing to get to his office without Chapel doing anything more than raising her brows at him.

He's a grown man with work to do. He can have a meltdown in the privacy of his quarters later.

★✚★✚★

He doesn't have a meltdown.

Instead, he lays in bed and thinks about Spock and this whole ridiculous situation he's gotten himself into until he can't stand being stuck with his own thoughts any longer, at which point he calls up Jim and asks if he wants to have a drink with him. They stay up too late, and when Leonard stumbles back to his quarters, he's pleased to find that his thoughts are no longer taken up by images of Spock and his fingers strumming his lute, though he makes sure to ignore the occasional sting of guilt he feels over missing one of Spock's performances for the first time in months.

He misses the next one too, but that can't be helped. Nurse Myers is starting his parental leave and Leonard spent the day signing off on forms to get that in motion. With one less pair of hands in sickbay, he had to take on a little more work, and he tells Uhura this when she asks if he'd be there that evening to watch them sing. It's not a lie, technically, but the paperwork he has to do is the sort of thing he would have set aside to be picked up later back when he still felt comfortable going to watch them sing.

He feels foolish avoiding Spock like this. It's idiotic and childish behavior, he knows it is, but he can't bring himself to show up, not until he's done processing his emotions and successfully bottling them up so tight that there's no risk of those feelings slipping out during a conversation with Spock.

Two days later, he sits down in the mess to eat his supper. He'd managed to join Sulu and Chekov at the tail-end of their meal, but now he sits alone, finishing off a curry dish that doesn't taste quite right. He's got a side of steamed broccoli that's way too wilted and he's considering just chucking it so he doesn't have to choke it down. It's pretty standard fare replicator food, unfortunately.

He's so busy staring at a piece of broccoli speared by his fork that he doesn't notice Spock's approaching until Spock is standing right across from him.

Leonard pales and places his fork down a little too quickly. "Spock! Hi! What can I do for you?"

For a moment, Spock does not speak. He gestures to the seat and Leonard nods in approval, watching with bated breath as Spock settles into place. He clasps his hands together and draws his shoulders back, but he does not meet Leonard's eyes. At length, he says, "Nyota spoke to me."

Leonard shuts his eyes, lips pinching tight together to stop himself from cursing. Of *course* Uhura got involved! She had no business telling Spock about this!

He does his best to push aside those thoughts for now, trying to fight through the feelings of shame and hurt that are crashing over him like waves. He forces his eyes open and finds that Spock's eyes are studying him, brows furrowed and lips downturned.

Leonard wets his lips, tapping his fingers nervously against the tabletop. "Damn. Look, Spock, I'm really sorry you've gotten dragged into all this. I was hoping to keep it to myself."

Spock blinks, head tilting to the side, but Leonard keeps going. "I know I should have told you, or at least talked to you about it, like an adult instead of like a child, but I didn't want to bother you with something as—as ridiculous as a crush." He scowls, feeling childish just saying that word. He grumbles, "Thought I'd long ago grown out of crushes, but nope! Lucky me!"

Spock's staring at him now, but who can blame him, with how much Leonard is rambling? Spock's lips part, but it takes a moment for him to say, "A crush? A romantic crush?"

Leonard drops his gaze, adjusting his plate and fork. "It doesn't have to get between us. I can keep things professional, Spock. You don't have to worry about me bringing this up ever again, or—or—"

He lifts his gaze, struggling to find the right words, but pauses when he gets a good look at Spock. Spock's frozen stiff, eyes wider than Leonard has ever seen them, his face pale. Leonard frowns. "Spock? What is it?"

"I believe there has been a misunderstanding," Spock says slowly. "When I said Nyota spoke to me, what I meant was—"

Spock stops, inhaling sharply. "Nyota explained to me why you had stopped attending our performances. She informed me that Nurse Myers was taking his leave to be with his child and that you had to take on his workload. Not…"

Spock does not finish that thought, his face twisting up as if it would pain him to do so.

"Oh," Leonard says dumbly.

It takes a moment for his brain to catch up with what Spock said. Then, he gasps, "*Oh.* Oh my god. Oh my god, Spock."

His cheeks are burning, but Spock's blushing too, both mortified by this encounter. Leonard drops his face into his hands. "I am so sorry. So, *so* sorry. I'm such an idiot, god, I can't believe I let—"

"Please, Doctor, stop apologizing."

"I'm a damn idiot! And I *should* be apologizing because I've made things weird, and I didn't even have to tell you—"

"Doctor McCoy, I insist that you stop!" Spock says sharply, and Leonard freezes, head snapping up to look at Spock once more. Spock's expression quickly morphs into something softer, his brows furrowing and lips thinning. He looks regretful, apologetic even, as if he'd been

startled by the volume of his own voice. "It is fine, Doctor. A shock, but nothing more. I am—relieved to hear this. You do not need to apologize because I, too, have been harboring affections for you."

"Harboring affections?" Leonard repeats under his breath, his mouth remaining open. "But that's—no, that's crazy. You can't."

Spock raises a brow. "I can't?"

"That's not what I mean," Leonard says hastily, shaking his head. His heart is pounding in his chest, and he covers his mouth with one of his hands to keep himself from laughing. Or maybe sobbing. He's not sure what noise will leave his throat if he lets it make a sound. He swallows thickly. "You *like* me?"

"I am fond of you," Spock corrects, and something deep inside of Leonard twists with delight. Spock adds, "Quite fond, in fact. I found it troubling when you stopped coming to see Nyota and I perform. Seeing you in attendance pleases me in ways that I, quite illogically, find that I cannot put into words."

"You wanted me to see you perform."

"I wanted you there, yes."

Leonard laughs then, unable to keep it bottled up. It's a mix of things: nervous laughter, yes, but also relief and pure, unfiltered joy. Spock seems to relax at the sound, and while he does not laugh himself, the corners of his eyes crinkle in amusement.

"I'm sorry I missed those last two performances," Leonard says, still smiling. "It won't happen again."

"It will likely happen again, Doctor," Spock replies. "Since we work on a starship and often do not have control over our schedules, especially in instances of emergency."

Leonard huffs, rolling his eyes. "Yes, Spock, as the chief medical officer, I think I know how that works." He then grins. "But I swear I won't miss any, as long as I have control over the circumstances. How about that, Spock? Think you can accept those terms and conditions?"

Spock agrees, and Leonard stands from his seat, picking up his tray to discard the remnants of his supper. Spock follows after him. "You know," Leonard says, "I've got an acoustic guitar back in my quarters—I'm out of practice and I've never been good at it, but if you're interested, we could go back there and we could, y'know, make some music. You could bring your lute along, too."

Spock smiles with his eyes again, and Leonard's insides twist up in glee. He's not sure he'll ever get used to Spock looking at him like that. "Yes, Doctor—I look forward to hearing you play."

They head into the corridor, walking in the direction of the turbolift. "Wasn't kidding before—I'm absolutely terrible. But," he pauses, wet his lips nervously. "I'll play if you sing for me?"

"You wish to hear me sing?" Spock asks, sounding surprised. They stop in front of the turbolift, waiting for it to arrive.

Leonard blushes. "Yeah. I mean, the reason I kept showing up to see you and Uhura perform was 'cuz I liked your voice."

Spock stares at him, speechless. It isn't until the turbolift doors open that Spock remembers to respond. "Thank you," he says softly. "And yes, Doctor, I would very much like to sing for you."

Leonard is unable to wipe the grin off his face for the rest of the walk back to his quarters.

On the way there, Leonard catches a young ensign staring — immediately, the ensign drops their gaze and rushes away. As they slip into Leonard's quarters, he jokes, "Think we're about to be the subjects of the ship's rumor mill?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Good," Leonard says, turning his back to Spock as he opens up his closet and reaches for where he left the guitar. "Let 'em talk; I don't care who knows that you're mine."

"Am I, Doctor?"

Leonard freezes. Shit. They hadn't actually talked about that yet.

"Well," Leonard says cautiously, turning back to look at Spock, "only if you want to be."

Spock reaches out, grazing Leonard's fingers with his own in a gesture that feels incredibly intimate. "Then I am yours."

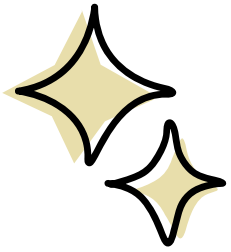
Spock says this like it is not a profound or significant statement. It has been a long time since anyone has been Leonard's—he's not about to treat such a thing lightly. He throws himself into Spock's arms; when their lips meet, he can feel Spock's lips curving up into a smile.

They forget about the guitar.

★✚★✚★

home

by Ferret



I love you
three words I've never said to you before
three words that made you shine
like the sun over desert rock
a star so bright it makes the world fade away

warm and soft and quiet are our
moments far from others gaze
peach pies and herbal teas,
petrichor scented and comforting
you are my home.

thyme

Hey, it's ok.

Still Our Hands Touch, Still with Hearts Beating

by Ollie Aster

Sickbay was in shambles. People were coming in from all over the ship in various states of injury, and they were running out of both beds and personnel. McCoy, himself, was stretched quite thin—out of one surgery and into the next.

"Bridge to Sickbay, medical emergency." It was Uhura's voice. The bridge has been mostly unaffected so far, but of course it couldn't remain that way. McCoy didn't even have to tell the nurses to head out with a stretcher, they just did it.

McCoy came out of intensive care just as they were bringing *him* in; his face full of green blood, his black hair matted and stuck to his forehead with it, his uniform in tatters. The nurses seemed unhurried, and McCoy's chest contracted painfully. No.

"Move," he grumbled at them, grabbing Spock's wrist and placing two fingers against his pulse points. He shifted a little, trying to find a steady beat, and couldn't.

"I'm sorry, Doctor. We checked already, no pulse."

"Damn Vulcan physiology," McCoy cursed, then let go of Spock's wrist. "Didn't you learn anything in med school? Vulcan blood pressure is too low to feel their pulse in their wrists unless it's incredibly steady!"

He tilted Spock's head, pushing down whatever was trying to rise in his throat, and pressed both hands, two fingers of each, against the hollows underneath Spock's jaw, his carotid arteries. And there, very faint and fluttering, he could feel it. Spock was still alive.

"Don't you dare go out on me," McCoy muttered, then turned to the nurses. "Get him to surgery, top priority."

All the beds in the main room were taken, and all the tricorders were being used. He would have no way of knowing what the exact problem was until he got Spock under some sensors. If he were human, then sure, McCoy was good enough with his hands to tell, but he had avoided touching Spock as much as possible and information on Vulcan

biology and medical issues was sparse enough to make him far too uncertain to risk a misdiagnosis.

He'd just have to wait and hope that the bastard didn't die on him.

He hasn't prayed to any god since his dad died. That day, he did.

★✚★✚★

Five hours later, the crisis was over and Spock was out of surgery, deep in a healing trance on one of the biobeds that had since cleared out. McCoy had collapsed in the chair in his office and finally let himself breathe. They had only lost two crewmen; the rest were out of the danger zone and on their way to recovery. Despite that, he couldn't help but linger on those who didn't make it— he never could.

He wasn't the Captain, he wasn't Jim, and he wasn't particularly fond of getting to know people when he didn't have to, so he knew nothing about Lt. Carmine and Ensign Poe. He had to be told their names, too, so that he could announce their deaths. Technically, Ensign Poe was under M'Benga's care, and McCoy had only seen him once or twice before that. He treated Lt. Carmine for Denebian flea bites only three weeks prior.

He pulled out their files now, even though he knew it was a bad idea. He needed to know how much he lost.

Carmine had a daughter, only two years old, back on Earth. Chicago. A wife, a mother, and a grandmother and grandfather. Two sisters and a brother. The Captain would have a lot of letters to send, but McCoy would never get to say anything to any of them, to apologize or make excuses for his failure. They would never know who failed to save their family member.

Poe only had a brother listed on his file, all other family members deceased. Still, it was possible he had a partner he never told Starfleet about—it wasn't too unusual, and it fell on the listed family members to hopefully tell them.

What got him was the last one left behind. He couldn't imagine what it felt like to be that person. Even if he wasn't in touch with his ex wife and his daughter, even if his dad was dead and he only talked to his mother once a month and only met his extended family whenever he was close enough to Earth and also on shore leave—which hasn't happened since they left space dock, mind you—he still had that family. At least he knew they were there.

Poe's brother didn't have any children listed, either.

★✚★✚★

Spock woke up three days later, and McCoy had been the one to slap him back awake.

He wasn't the last one left in sickbay; some patients were in much worse condition than he was.

Still, Spock was the one McCoy was most eager to get out of his sickbay. Seeing him lie prone like that, his chest barely rising, only the beeping of the biobed confirming that he was even still alive, even though it counted his pulse at 1 bpm, was incredibly distressing. McCoy found himself counting the seconds between heartbeats himself, even going so far as to press his fingers to the hollow of Spock's neck to feel the flutter there.

He slapped him with all the frustration of the past few days, and Spock almost had to throw him across the room to get him to stop.

McCoy left him on the biobed without discharging him and locked himself in his office, where he spent the next hour crying.

He was a total mess. He had lost many patients, more than he could count, sometimes even all at the same time, but he had never reacted this way. He had never hit anyone out of anger or frustration- it wasn't only against his nature, it was against his oath.

And he never spent so long crying over someone he *didn't* fail to save.

By the time he got himself together and left his office, Spock was gone. Chapel took one look at him and ordered him to his quarters to rest. For once, he did as he was told and didn't argue.

He slept for 14 hours.

★✚★✚★

McCoy was avoiding Spock. He was sure Spock could tell; it wasn't the first time he was mortally wounded in the line of duty, and McCoy had always forced him into recovery evaluations for the following month or two. Not this time.

He was perfectly happy to continue avoiding Spock and the odd, semi-painful clench of his gut that appeared whenever he saw him, but Spock clearly had other plans.

"You have not called me in for an evaluation," Spock said soon after entering McCoy's office, standing in front of his desk at parade rest.

"Have you had any problems since you were released from sickbay?" McCoy asked, leaning back in his chair casually despite the dreadful sensation returning.

"Negative—"

"Then there's no need for you to worry." McCoy got up and turned around, pretending to look at the wall of old medical devices behind his desk. "You don't have to bother me."

"It is standard procedure—"

"You never had a problem avoiding sickbay before!"

Spock fell silent, but McCoy didn't hear him leave. He stood with his back to the room, waiting for the sound of footsteps that never came.

"You have been avoiding me, Doctor."

McCoy couldn't dispute that. Spock was too clever to be fooled. "So what if I have?"

"If I have done something to offend you, I would prefer you tell me so I can avoid making the same mistake in the future."

McCoy turned around. Spock's face was impassive, the way it was only when he was attempting to hide particularly strong or volatile emotions. There was something in the slope of his shoulders that spoke of nervousness.

"You haven't done anything wrong," McCoy said. "You nearly died. It unnerved me, is all. I'll get over it."

"Why?" Spock asked, and McCoy raised an eyebrow. "I am still alive. Why are you bothered by my almost dying?"

"I don't know. Because you're my friend. Because I care about you."

Spock considered his answer for a moment. "I see. Perhaps an evaluation would help you reaffirm that I am alive and alleviate your worries?"

McCoy sighed. “You know, at this point I’m starting to think you just want my hands on you.”

He gestured towards the biobed, and if Spock’s cheeks darkened at his comment, he told himself he was just imagining it.

Spock laid down on the biobed and McCoy looked over the readings. He had made a full recovery. The machine beeped steadily, only slightly faster than Spock’s baseline. McCoy’s tricorder read only mild internal scarring from the ordeal, no lasting damage. So why did McCoy still feel like it was the middle of an emergency?

In fact, this was worse. Never in all his years as a doctor did his hands shake like they did at that moment. He usually prided himself on his steady hands.

“Well, you’ve got a clean bill of health,” McCoy said, turning to put the equipment away, pretending his voice wasn’t shaking as much as his hands.

“You are still unnerved,” Spock said, and when McCoy turned back around he found him sitting up, watching him. He put his hands behind his back, tightening his grip until the shaking stopped.

“I’m fine.”

“Evidently, you are not. Perhaps a more ‘hands-on’ approach would be beneficial?”

Now McCoy couldn’t pretend the blush on Spock’s face was simply his imagination. He really *did* want McCoy’s hands on him.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked. “This isn’t just for me. You don’t like it when people touch you.”

“It is true that I prefer to avoid physical contact with most people, especially humans, however I have never had an issue with being touched by you.”

“I would have thought, with how emotional you always say I am, you’d hate touching me the most.”

“You are always quite respectful in your contact.”

McCoy looked at him. It felt like they were going around in circles.

“Why are you doing this, Spock? *Really*?”

Spock met his eyes straight on. “I desire your touch.”

McCoy was startled. Spock was never so straightforward with his desires. He took a deep breath, attempting to ground himself. Then he took a step closer and with sure, steady fingers, he pressed against the pulse point in Spock’s neck, feeling the blood thrum under the surface.

“I am alive, Doctor,” Spock murmured. “I will not keel over and die.”

There were tears welling in McCoy’s eyes, though he wasn’t sure why. “You’ll be the death of me.”

Spock smiled, that smile that was more eyes than lips but glowed as warm as the sun on a summer day in Georgia. He gently grabbed McCoy’s wrist and pulled his hand away from his neck, still folded into the same position with the middle and forefinger outstretched. He folded his own hand into the same position, and pressed the tips of his fingers to Mccoy’s.

McCoy’s breath caught in his chest. “Isn’t this how Vulcans kiss, Spock?”

“It is a close equivalent, yes,” Spock confirmed, running his fingers along McCoy’s, softly stroking, until he lined up the lines of their top knuckles and pushed, still holding

McCoy's hand in place by the wrist, and McCoy gasped.

The pressure amplified his own pulse, heart racing, but it also revealed Spock's, buzzing against his own.

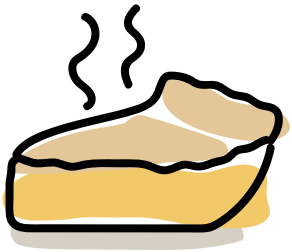
"I am alive," Spock said again, and this time McCoy finally felt he could believe him.

★✚★✚★

FAILURE
...
!!
MATCH
Mr. Spock, you damn well saved the day!
That was great teamwork!

Peach Pie

by Azami



"Now, what's this, Spock? Cookin', or biological warfare?" McCoy eyed Spock's potluck contribution; a mixture of colorful, unfamiliar baked vegetables, piping in the bath of sauce and spices, all served in complement with a steamed Vulcan grain that he recognized but didn't remember the name of. But the spice from the stuff was practically overpowering without him even eating it. It made his eyes water, like getting too close to the smoke from a fire.

In all honesty, it seemed exciting. McCoy wasn't a loather of spice. He liked spicy chili, hot pot, jerk chicken, spiced rum; all kinds of tasty things that'd make his mouth burn. It wasn't that he disliked the idea of trying the dish at all; it was that he wanted Spock to tell him about it, and with Spock, an insult always worked better than a request.

"If I was attempting *biological warfare*, Doctor, I would not have chosen such an obvious method as poisoning you via food." Spock paused to consider McCoy's initial jab. "I am lucky to have found Vulcan ingredients in such abundance in the market. All of the vegetables and spices are Vulcan in origin, and the grain is myropses, which has been grown on Vulcan since the early days of space travel when it was first imported." He knew McCoy's game at this point, it seemed, and he looked like he was taking an un-Vulcan-like pride in his recreation of the dish. "I ruminated on what to prepare for quite a long time yesterday evening."

McCoy leaned in a bit to really admire his work while he listened. It did look absolutely mouthwatering.

"You are unaware of this, however, Vulcan cuisine exists on what you would call t*wo ends of a spectrum.* Unflavored meals focused on texture and, in contrast, meals that take full advantage of the spices available on Vulcan." The corners of Spock's mouth quirked up—subtly but certainly fiendishly. "I only used a small fraction of the traditional spices for this dish. Perhaps I should have made a tasteless dish in order to suit your palette more appropriately," he insulted.

McCoy resisted a simple '*bite me.*' "Maybe I shoulda made some spicy harissa aubergine pie. Had you put those Vulcan taste buds to the test," he genuinely considered. "Lucky for your

Vulcan ego, I just made some sweet peach pies."

"Then, perhaps I'll show you the fault in your thinking that any Human spice would adequately phase my palate on another day, Doctor."

"You'd-"

McCoy was promptly cut off by Jim awkwardly ringing the little dinner bell he'd replicated. The entire potluck crowd straightened up and looked to the captain.

It was truly a wonderful sight laid out on the several large tables in front of them. The *Enterprise*'s cultural exchange potluck was many a crewmember's favorite time of year, including McCoy's. There were so many tantalizing-looking breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and desserts scattered across the table, and even more odd-looking ones. Jim had been wise enough this year to separate the dishes by smell after the absolute fiasco of smells from last year's contributions. It certainly made where he was standing all the more dangerous for his sinuses. But, no one would be skipping over his pie sitting on the opposite table because of the magma incarnate Spock had brought along.

"Everyone, welcome, to the annual *Enterprise* potluck. Today we celebrate, where we came from, the people we surround ourselves with and choose to care for now, and the way that our strength is in what each individual one of us brings to the table—because our differences are the exact thing that make, *wonderful* times like this, possible. I … remember all those complaints last year about the length of my speech, and all I have to say is shame on you all for not enjoying the only thing I can bring to this table. You, *don't*, want my cooking here," he got a light chuckle from the crowd, "and dig in." Jim stepped down from his spot at the head of the intersection of tables as everyone rushed for their plates.

McCoy really did try to seem like he wasn't in a hurry to taste test Spock's special Vulcan dish that he'd so considerately made palatable for human consumption, but it was the third thing he'd put on his first plate. Spock definitely took notice, looking at him from across the table. And McCoy took note of that look … and the peach pie slice on Spock's dessert plate. That eased him. He'd actually been fairly concerned that Spock wouldn't like what he brought to the table this year; Vulcans weren't exactly known for being avid lovers of dessert. And the two years before, he hadn't gotten to participate.

As McCoy made his way to Jim's side at one of the sitting tables, he found himself troubled by the idea of Spock eating his pie. He knew he'd put a lot of effort into making it just right, and he knew that it was *probably one of the best damn things at the entire potluck.* But it was also the first time Spock was going to try his cooking. *What are you sweating for, McCoy? It doesn't matter what Spock thinks. Get it together.* He couldn't fathom why Spock's judgment on the matter seemed to get him so anxious.

Spock sat on the other side of Jim, and McCoy eyed up his plates. Despite the many other wonderfully colorful dishes Spock had decided to sample, he couldn't help but lock his eyes on his own slice of pie on that dessert plate. McCoy briefly considered causing a scene, doing something–anything–to get rid of that slice on Spock's plate. He won the battle with himself and forced himself to calm down, of course, but the whole thing made him feel silly.

McCoy took a deep breath, double-checked to make sure he had his little shot glass of milk, and took a bite of Spock's cooking.

It was incredible.

The vegetables were crisp on the outside and tender on the inside. The perfect texture, easy

to chew, and easy to savor. As McCoy's teeth bit through them, the juice went straight to his taste buds, sweet and sour. But the method of cooking added something else; a kind of char, almost like it had been grilled, or, maybe, that was one of the spices. That's when the first wave of spice hit. Whatever it was, it was intense, prickling at his tongue and down his throat, then right up into the sinuses. It was a good burn, like the first time he tried Thai food. The spice played in harmony with all those flavors, pairing so perfectly with the plain, grounding taste of the grain and just begging to be chased with a nice smooth drink. Then the second wave hit, and he sniffled a little as his nose started running. McCoy held a napkin over his nose and mouth and let it run for a second, not wanting to give away that the third wave, the aftertaste, was making his eyes burn. He shut them.

There was no doubt. Spock was a damn good cook.

McCoy subtly wiped his nose and took half his shot of milk, wishing that he had gotten a full glass and didn't have to save the other half for what was left of it … and also wishing that he had a bigger stomach to go back and get more without sacrificing the capacity to try all the rest of the food he'd piled on his plates. McCoy cleared his throat, the remnants of the spices tickling where the milk hadn't entirely soothed.

Then, he subtly looked over to Spock.

Spock was sitting there, looking as though he hadn't even started eating, like something was on his mind. Not something troubling him, more so that he was ruminating on something he found important. He knew the man, after all—he knew what the look on his face was. The Vulcan was definitely thinking about something very important to him. So important that he hadn't touched anything on his plates— McCoy did a double take.

Spock had touched one thing on one of his plates. McCoy's slice of pie, which was completely gone. Briefly, he was flattered … before realizing all the different things that could mean.

Maybe Spock hated it. Maybe it'd put him off eating altogether. Or maybe he hadn't checked the little ingredient card in front of it closely enough, and it had something he couldn't eat, and now he was considering the validity of calling the whole thing off for himself and going back up to the ship to pretend that he wasn't having a reaction to it. Or, maybe he was trying to think of the best possible insult to grant him after the meal. Well, two can play at that, Spock! Yours is—well, it was perfect. It was just great; he couldn't think of a bad thing to say that wasn't just insulting himself for not having a Vulcan tolerance.

Maybe Spock was thinking the same thing. *Well, not exactly the same thing.*

Maybe Spock was thinking that he wished he'd tried his cooking sooner. Maybe, just like McCoy, he wished they'd just cooked for each other so they didn't have to worry about leaving out all the other wonderful things there were to eat on their plates.

No, not Spock. The man doesn't even eat breakfast. He only ever eats what he needs to survive unless it's in the name of being diplomatic. It seemed inconceivable that the Vulcan could be thinking of something so worldly as having another bite of something delicious.

"Since when are you a slow eater, Bones?" Jim remarked, nudging his shoulder knowingly.

"It's called pacing yourself, Jim. Good for big meals like this. 'N I'll recommend it to you if you don't slow down." McCoy gestured to Jim's half-finished plate. "You even chewing? You're gonna give yourself a stomach ache."

Jim huffed with a bit of amusement, both of them knowing that McCoy was just crabby about being caught staring at Spock and wondering what he thought of his food.

McCoy took a bite of something else on the plate to avoid more ridicule, listening as Jim turned to Spock and said, "Not hungry, Spock?"

Whatever game he was playing.

Sure, everything at the potluck that McCoy had put on his plate tasted incredible. There wasn't a single thing he regretted, even the things that squirmed under his fork—a bit like octopus with soy sauce, he considered, and he knew better than to be put off—but nothing stuck in his head quite like Spock's silly little spicy vegetable dish. He was embarrassed, finding his thoughts drifting over and over again to a hypothetical situation of him walking up to Spock and asking about the recipe.

On one hand, it felt a whole lot like praising the enemy. The little game they played that neither of them was supposed to really win didn't work that way. Sure, the occasional compliment on the other's competency slipped out on occasion. But asking the man to make him dinner was a whole 'nother thing. It was so … *domestic*. And the thought of sitting down in one of their quarters over a Vulcan meal that Spock had put so much time and effort into preparing seemed a bit too much like him asking Spock on a date for his comfort. Although, it didn't sound like a bad date. It sounded like a very good date. In fact, it sounded like the best possible date with Spock he could think of at that moment.

In that train of thought, McCoy considered that it might even be a bit of a show of strength on his part, a brag that he was able to handle it. One of his ways of teasing him that was more of a compliment despite its disguise as a boast.

McCoy thought back and forth on it until just about everyone at their table had finished everything on their plates. Not that he noticed until Spock intruded behind him.

"Doctor."

McCoy looked back over his shoulder at Spock, playing with the last thing on his plate with his fork. "Spock," he acknowledged.

"We will be in orbit of this planet for 57 more of your Earth hours. I intend to acknowledge your challenge. You will inform me of what time would work best for you. Then, we will meet and you will prepare a dish for me that you believe would adequately *test* my *Vulcan taste buds*."

McCoy was stunned for a moment, of course. Spock had beat him to it. He practically did everything but schedule the date. But McCoy was too quick a thinker to sit there with his mouth hanging open about it. "All right, Spock. Only if you take me to the market and show off your fancy Vulcan veggies and spices." He wouldn't let Spock be in charge of the whole situation without a fight.

"Acceptable," Spock immediately acknowledged, almost as if he would accept any condition.

"And, one more thing." McCoy pushed his luck.

"Yes?" Spock shifted uncomfortably, as if he was worried–if McCoy didn't know better than to think such a thing about a distinguished Vulcan like Spock.

"You're gonna make this for me again the night after we leave orbit."

★✚★✚★

FLOUR

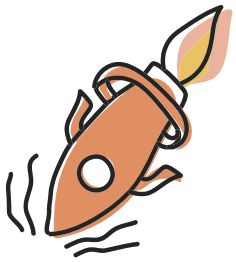
SEB ★ 2024

★ first Vulcan Kiss ★

your love is true blue.

Entangled

by swimmingwolf59



Thirty years before Zefram Cochrane would complete his warp drive engine and a ship full of Vulcans would land to greet him, a shuttlepod crash-lands on Earth in the peaty swamps of southern Georgia.

The occupant of the shuttlepod is a Vulcan scientist, part of an exploratory team studying this quadrant of the galaxy. After the initial surveys of Earth that occurred in response to humans launching their first artificial satellite in the Vulcan year 1557, very few shuttles have returned to this solar system. While humans were interesting, they were not yet advanced enough for space travel, and thus Vulcan could have no further contact with them.

This team, however, believes there is more to learn about both Earth and its surrounding solar system. The occupant of the shuttlepod in particular had been determined to join the survey team, despite his father's disapproval, as he's most fascinated by space, space phenomena, and alien culture and history. The 1557 surveys had said almost nothing about humans, despite the team's time on the surface—he's wanted to fill in those gaps ever since he read the reports. Thus, he'd signed up for this mission as soon as he heard about it. While it is not ideal, as their research has to be done purely from orbit so they don't risk further contamination following the 1557 surveys, it's the best they can do at the moment. He throws himself rigorously into studying human culture by picking up radio waves and other transmissions.

He's listening to a strange conversation that seems to be about a chemistry teacher and a student grossly mistreating their experiments when an explosion suddenly rocks the ship. He's thrown into the bulkhead, his head smacking back against it hard enough to momentarily stun him. He's half-collapsed against the wall, trying to focus his vision, when his captain rushes by. She lightly grasps his shoulder, projecting a sharp, urgent emotion to help him refocus on the present.

"Abandon ship," she says calmly. "There has been a warp containment breach—the warp core will only last another 5.257 minutes."

He nods and stumbles through the corridor, feeling his way along the wall until he finds an escape pod. He's normally a skilled pilot, but with his vision and thoughts still blurry he's barely able to program the pod's departure and trajectory. The pod shoots out of the ship, trembling, and then abruptly accelerates as the ship's explosion catches it and thrusts it even further off course.

He tries to steer the pod away from Earth's atmosphere, but doesn't manage to cover enough distance before gravity catches it. He plummets to the surface, only conscious long enough to feel the whiplash as the shuttle crashes into the ground.

He has crashed on the outskirts of Okefenokee Swamp, deep enough in the wilderness that most people don't even hear it. He is badly injured on a planet with no knowledge of his species or his biology, and he has very little in terms of food, water, and equipment. The transceiver and most everything else is damaged beyond repair, and the status of his fellow shipmates is impossible to determine.

The Vulcan, however, in his unconscious state, knows nothing of this.

Neither does the human who finds him.

He is a doctor, and to him, that is currently all that he is. He is not a husband, because he and his ex-wife were having problems for years, struggling to connect in meaningful ways and find time for each other in paths that were slowly growing apart. A few years ago, they finally had enough arguments to settle on divorce. He is not a son, because around the same time, his father died, and he is convinced that it's his fault. He couldn't find a cure; he didn't wait long enough; he didn't try hard enough. He is sort of a father, but only barely, as he is estranged from his daughter. In his life, all he has are the smiles his patients give him when he stitches them back together.

He is probably also a hermit.

But he isn't a hermit that night. He's been studying a patient's rare blood disease, and believes the venom of a particular snake may hold the answer to the cure.

When Leonard McCoy slips into the swamplands outside the boundaries of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge that evening, looking for a snake, the first thing he sees is a column of smoke. He frowns at it, and then starts making his way towards it. It's unusual for people to light fires at the height of summer, especially so close to the park boundary—even hooligans know better than to break the rules in the middle of dense, protected foliage. So either something's wrong, or he needs to give some fools a piece of his mind. Both thoughts compel him forward.

He stumbles into a clearing and, for a moment, just gapes at what he sees.

He can't even tell what it is, at first. It's dark, and whatever it is is half-buried in the ground. Parts of it are still smoldering, the smoke further obscuring his view. But as McCoy picks his way closer, he realizes that it has to be some kind of ship. It sure as hell doesn't look like a *boat*, though: it has three rocket-like structures on the back-end, but no other obvious propulsive mechanisms to be seen. It's a slick, slim ship, all red in color and made out of a material that doesn't look familiar. It also has a ring around the belly, connected in a way that doesn't make any sense just by looking at it.

McCoy's distracted from considering the ship further, however, as he zeroes in on the open hatch along the side. Someone is half-collapsed over the opening, face buried in the peat.

McCoy hurries over, splashing so loudly that it startles a pair of great horned owls in a nearby tree. They take off with huge flaps of their wings, hooting at him angrily. While he

would usually stop to watch them go, his mind is solidly in doctor mode. He plants his feet solidly in the muck, lifting with his knees to pull the person the rest of the way out of the ship. He quickly turns them around, setting them down on their back and cleaning off their face with a handkerchief to make sure they can breathe.

He startles as he glances at their face. Their eyebrows arch sharply, the ridge following along underneath proof enough that they're not just drawn on. But stranger than that are their ears—long and pointed. McCoy's seen people in costume wearing ears like this, but for the life of him he can't see a seam, or any other sign that they're fake.

McCoy shakes his head at himself. There will be plenty of time to ponder that later—he has to check the person over for injuries.

He runs his hands gently along their body, probing for broken bones and other internal injuries. They're badly bruised, scrapes all along their body, but nothing is broken, thankfully. They're also, strangely, covered in a slick-looking substance—McCoy would believe it was blood if it wasn't dark green. Still, the way it pools under their body and sticks to his clothes and hands feels overwhelmingly familiar. He presses his ear against their chest and frowns—he can't hear a heartbeat. But he can feel the person breathing, so he knows they're not dead. How can that be? He moves his head around and eventually finds an audible beat closer to what *should* be the person's liver.

If McCoy was anyone else, he would probably be freaking out right about now. But to McCoy, nothing has ever mattered more than saving lives—it's a big reason why his marriage failed. So he doesn't focus on the ears, or the blood-like substance, or the weird heart position, and instead continues his examination.

They have a nasty contusion on the back of their head, but otherwise their injuries aren't life-threatening. Still, McCoy can't treat their injuries here—he shudders when he thinks about all of the bacteria floating around in a swamp. Without considering it further, he lifts the person into his arms and staggers back the way he came.

When he finally gets the person back to his apartment, he lays a blanket down on the couch and arranges them as comfortably as possible on top of it. Then, he gets to work cleaning and sterilizing their wounds. He wipes the person's face and body clean with a sterilized cloth, frowning as more of the green substance spills out from their wounds as he does so. This really is blood, then—just what in the hell …?

He stares at the person again. Green blood. Arched eyebrows and pointed ears. Heart where the liver should be. A strange ship-like machine half-buried in the swamp. He's seen a lot of strange medical cases in his time, but never, *ever* anything like this.

As crazy as it sounds, the only plausible explanation he can come up with is that this person isn't human.

McCoy bites his lip. He feels like he's stumbled into something *way* over his head, and maybe he shouldn't have, but this person still needs his help—that wound on the back of their head isn't going to get better without a couple of stitches.

He pulls out his sewing kit and gets to work. Once he's done with their head, he bandages the rest of their wounds and then stands, hesitating. He doesn't dare give them any medication, as who knows how it would react in a non-human's system, and tries not to feel guilty about it. It also feels … foolish, somehow, to leave them alone. What if they leave while McCoy's asleep? If they were to even step foot outside, people would notice their strange ears and their green blood and …

McCoy shakes his head. Even if that did happen, it's none of his business. In fact, it'd be easier for him if the person left on their own, because what the hell is he supposed to do with them otherwise? They would just cause him nothing but trouble, and after finally getting mostly over his divorce and losing his daughter, the last thing he needs is more trouble.

It's none of his business, he repeats to himself as he pulls his spare cot over to the couch, but it *is* his business to keep an eye on his patient.

He curls up on the cot, counting the person's strangely slow breaths until he falls asleep.

He wakes up to his patient standing over him, observing him.

He shouts, rolling right off the cot and landing face first on the floor in a sprawling heap of limbs. His heart is hammering against his ribcage and he quickly scrambles upright again, instinctively placing his back against the cot. "What the—?!"

The person continues to observe him, head tilted to the side like a dog facing something they don't understand. They probably shouldn't be standing, based on the speckling of green coating their bandages, but they don't seem to be having any trouble with it. They also don't seem to be threatening him, though that doesn't lower McCoy's guard any. He looks up at the person's face, startled by their eyes that he hadn't been able to see before – they are so *dark*, almost black.

McCoy feels a little like he's drowning in them.

The person says something in a deep, rich voice. Their words sound like sand sifting through one's fingers, like the wind sweeping across the wide open plains. McCoy's only foreign language skills are Spanish and Swahili, and neither of those seem like they would help in this situation. He tries sign language, which the person deftly responds to, but they're not speaking the same language here, either.

McCoy runs a hand through his hair, completely unsure of what to do. Here he is, a country doctor with, by all accounts, an *alien* in his living room who he can't communicate a single word to. "Well, this is just great."

The person pulls some sort of device from their pocket and starts fiddling with it, turning a dial as McCoy speaks. McCoy trails off, unsure if they're even listening anymore, but they make a beckoning-like gesture at him, like they're asking for more.

McCoy scoffs. "I don't see how this is going to help any, considering you can't even understand me—"

"Ah," they say, "I understand you now."

McCoy gapes at them, dumbfounded. His eyes drop down to the device in the person's hand. "… Do you mean to tell me that that device you've got there is translating everything I'm saying to you, and everything you're saying to me?"

"That is correct," the person says, pocketing the device. "It had not picked up enough of your language to translate before."

McCoy shakes his head in disbelief, then mutters under his breath, "Well, that's certainly not Earth technology …"

"It is not," the person responds, startling McCoy. He hadn't expected them to be able to hear him, but with the size and shape of those ears of theirs, maybe it shouldn't be surprising. "Though our communications officer did perform extensive research and cataloged many of your planet's languages, they unfortunately did not have time to update all of our personal translators with such information. Thus, the delay."

McCoy stares at them. Then, hysterically, he begins to laugh. "I'm sorry, do you care to explain just what the hell is going on here?!"

The person tilts their head to the side again. "Elaborate."

"I mean—" McCoy gestures at them uselessly, failing to find words for a moment. "Are you seriously telling me that you're an *alien*?"

"Ah. I am a resident of the planet Vulcan, which is located approximately 16.238 light years from here." The person tucks their hands neatly behind their back. "I am part of a research team studying Earth and its people, but our ship was destroyed due to a warp core breach, forcing all of us to make emergency landings on the surface."

"…Oh my God," McCoy mutters, clutching his head. This can't be happening. Maybe he's still asleep. Maybe he drank so much after his divorce that he slipped into a coma and now he's having an insane dream while he's unconscious in the hospital. That has to be the answer—and besides, didn't they disprove centuries ago that the planet Vulcan existed?

The person—the *Vulcan*—hesitates before offering, "I wished to express gratitude to you for saving my life. That is what humans do, correct? My name is Spock. I believe your language also employs gendered pronouns—please use masculine ones to refer to me."

Spock. It fits him, somehow, despite being such an unfamiliar name. McCoy clears his throat and says, "Leonard McCoy, he/him. Doctor."

Without thinking, he reaches out to shake Spock's hand, which seems to startle him.

"… Sorry," McCoy mutters, awkwardly letting go. That probably wasn't one of his better ideas. Though, to be fair, *everything* he's done since he found Spock in the swamp hasn't been one of his better ideas. "Around here, that's part of how we introduce ourselves."

"… I see," Spock murmurs, staring at his hand like he's never seen it before. Then he looks back up at McCoy and presents a strange hand gesture. "This is the greeting gesture on my planet."

McCoy stares at him, tries to copy it, and then has to bite back a yelp of pain. "Sorry, uh, I don't think my fingers bend like that."

"That is quite alright," Spock says, raising an eyebrow as he tucks his hand away again.

If McCoy didn't know any better, he would've *sworn* that Spock was making fun of him. But it probably doesn't make sense to apply human mannerisms to someone from … Vulcan.

An insane burst of giggles almost consumes McCoy again, but he manages to hold them back as something occurs to him. "So, wait—why were you studying Earth? I mean, why even come to this side of the galaxy at all?"

"Curiosity," Spock says simply.

McCoy stares at him, waits for more. When nothing comes, he barks out, "That's it?"

"Does one need another reason to explore?" Spock asks, though something about him seems cagey all of the sudden. "My people developed space travel seventy-six years ago, and we have since devoted ourselves to learning what lies beyond our planetary system. When we learned that your planet was populated, we stopped to observe."

A sudden chill shoots down McCoy's spine. It's a bit unnerving to realize that Earth, and humanity, have been observed all this time, without even knowing. Although, the search for life and what lies beyond the galaxy is exactly the kind of thing that humans are trying to study and learn, too.

He supposes it makes sense that aliens would be doing the same thing.

"We're slowly working our way towards that too, I think," McCoy says. "Had to stop briefly to focus on solving our environmental crisis, but we're back in full swing now."

Spock nods. "That is another reason why we are interested in you. You may be exploring the stars yourselves soon, and we wanted to familiarize ourselves with you before that happened."

"You could've just come down and said hello," McCoy grumbles.

Spock raises an arched eyebrow. "And how do you think your people would have reacted, given your reaction to my presence?"

McCoy doesn't even have to think on that one. "Mass panic."

"Precisely," Spock says, as if McCoy was a young student who just answered a math problem correctly. "Before first contact is established, we make it a policy not to reveal our presence, or otherwise interfere in the cultures we are observing."

McCoy can't help but grin. "So it doesn't break your little policy explaining all of this to me?"

Spock opens his mouth, and then closes it again. "… As you were already aware of my non-human nature, it would've been worse to try and pretend—"

"Alright, alright," McCoy waves him off good-naturedly. "But what if you encountered a pre-space travel planet that was suffering from a disease that you could cure? Are you seriously telling me you wouldn't stop to help them?"

Spock considers him for a moment. "We could not interfere. Our interference would impact the culture's development in ways that are impossible to predict."

McCoy bristles. "Maybe that's just a difference between our species, but that doesn't sit right with me, letting all of those people die."

"You are speaking of hypothetical people."

"And you're talking about genocide!"

"I am not saying we are without empathy," Spock says. "However, if we saved the life of someone who was otherwise going to die, it could cause catastrophic changes to that planet's future. One small group of people should not be in charge of such decisions."

"Now you're talking about hypothetical apocalypses," McCoy scoffs. "Where the hell's the logic in that?"

Spock tilts his head slightly, as if surprised. "… As much as I find myself enjoying debating space travel policy with you, I must return to my ship to assess the damage."

McCoy stalls, caught off guard. He'd gotten so into the debate that, for a moment, he almost forgot that he should find it very strange that he's arguing semantics with someone from another planet in his living room. "… I'm not sure you should be trekking through the swamp with a head wound like that."

"Perhaps not, but I must also try to contact my shipmates." Spock finds his boots where McCoy had placed them next to the couch and sits down to pull them on. "If you will give me directions—"

"Nope, if you're going to do something foolhardy like that, I'm coming with you," McCoy snaps, without thinking. When Spock just stares at him, he continues hesitantly, "Just … in case your wounds get worse."

Spock considers him for a moment longer, and then nods. "Very well, Doctor. If you would lead the way."

McCoy hesitates, opens his mouth to protest, and then decides against it. He grabs his keys

and starts to head out the door, Spock right on his heels. Right as he crosses the threshold, however, he stalls and turns back to look Spock over. His ears are obviously not human, but the rest of his face alone wouldn't be very telling …

McCoy pops back inside, rummages around in a drawer, and then throws a beanie onto Spock's head, covering those strange ears.

Spock's eyebrow goes up again. "I do not require a hat."

"You do if you want to follow that non-interference policy of yours," McCoy says. "I'm not going to report any of this, but you can't control a large amount of people seeing you in the light of day. And those ears of yours aren't exactly subtle."

Spock's face does a funny thing, like he wants to argue, but then he simply dips his head and follows McCoy out the door.

Spock's escape pod is still exactly where he had left it nose down in the muck.

It looks even weirder in the daytime. Night has a funny way of making even mundane things look strange, but it hadn't been kidding about this—getting a good look at it now, McCoy doesn't think it could ever possibly be mistaken for something that originated on Earth.

He wonders how someone's going to try and explain it. It would be easy if Spock was still with it, but …

McCoy shifts uneasily. "We might not want to linger too long. That ship's kind of conspicuous."

"I will only be a few minutes," Spock says, already half-leaning into the open hatch.

McCoy tries to keep an eye and ear out for anyone coming as Spock rummages through the pod. However, he quickly becomes distracted by the bizarre equipment piling up at Spock's feet. Absolutely *none* of it is familiar, except for a small device that looks like a flip phone. Despite Spock's green blood, pointed ears, and heart where the liver should be, somehow it hadn't really fully sunken in until now. But Spock is from *another planet*, and he had flown here in a *spaceship*.

McCoy feels a bit faint.

"Doctor," Spock says, in that deep rich voice of his, and McCoy jumps about three feet in the air. "All of my equipment was damaged in the crash. I currently have no way to ascertain the status of my shipmates, or return to my ship or planet."

McCoy stares at him. He'd said it so calmly, like that wasn't the worst possible thing he could've discovered. "That…sucks. What are you going to do?"

"I do not know." Spock stares down at the pile at his feet thoughtfully. "I may be able to repair some of it, but it will take time. I suppose I will have to live here on Earth in the meantime."

McCoy swallows. He just knows he's going to regret this, but he's never been able to turn away someone in need. "Then you can stay at my place."

Spock's head shoots up to stare at him. Embarrassed, McCoy starts rambling, "I already know your secret, so you don't have anything to hide from me. Plus, I'm a doctor, and you're injured, so I can continue to monitor you and help you heal. Plus—"

"I would be gratified if I could stay with you, Doctor," Spock interrupts. "Your arguments are surprisingly logical."

McCoy splutters. "Hey—what do you mean *surprisingly*?"

"I mean that, thus far, your arguments have been based almost entirely on emotionalism, not logic," Spock says, but there's something almost warm about his expression as he bends down

to collect his equipment into a small satchel. "Thus, I would not have predicted your arguments now to be based on logic."

"You're just saying that because you lost that argument earlier," McCoy accuses.

Spock doesn't smile, doesn't really emote much of anything, McCoy realizes suddenly. It hadn't occurred to him until now how strange it really is that Spock's face is so impassive. And yet, there's an air about him that feels almost … *playful.*

But then, just as quickly as it had appeared, it's gone and Spock is brushing past him back in the direction of McCoy's apartment.

When they return, Spock's head wound is bleeding so profusely that it's completely soaked through the bandage.

McCoy clicks his tongue and reaches up to wipe a drop of green blood from his forehead. "I told you you were too injured to be wandering about in a swamp."

"It was imperative that I retrieve my equipment," Spock says, his eyes focused on McCoy's hand. "As you said, my vessel was too conspicuous. If I had waited longer, someone may have discovered it."

"Even so," McCoy grumbles.

He watches Spock lean down to place his satchel on the floor and almost fall over in the process—McCoy instantly goes to him to keep him upright.

Spock makes a small noise as McCoy wraps his arm around him and starts guiding him back towards the couch. "This is not necessary, Doctor."

"So you would've preferred I let you wipe out on the floor, huh?"

Spock mouths the words 'wipe out', but then merely shakes his head. His body is warm against McCoy's, almost *hot.* McCoy's concerned that he may have a fever, but for all he knows this could be the natural body temperature for a Vulcan. He just doesn't know enough—and why *would* he, but it doesn't make it any less frustrating.

He deposits Spock on the couch and then grabs his medical bag and a stool. He sits down next to Spock and attaches a thermometer to his finger to check his temperature and pulse. When he takes it back, he raises his eyebrows at the result. "…Is your normal body temperature supposed to register as 201.6 degrees?"

Spock blinks. "No, though I do not believe we use the same temperature scale. A Vulcan's normal body temperature ranges from 70 to 80 degrees."

… Considering that McCoy's thermometer is reading 201.6 degrees Fahrenheit, Spock's temperature scale doesn't match up with Celsius, Kelvin, or any other metric on Earth.

"Great," McCoy mutters, sighing as he puts away the thermometer. "I'm going to have to rely on you to tell me if you feel like you have a fever or an infection, then."

Spock slowly raises an eyebrow. "As you wish, Doctor, but would you be able to treat it even if I did?"

McCoy scowls. It's true, but he hates to admit it. "You sure have a sassy attitude towards someone who may be the only thing standing between you and death."

"My apologies," Spock says, "I was not aware you were someone who possessed such power."

McCoy snorts. "Now you're just being an asshole."

Spock tilts his head. "… My translator conveyed that as a very strange word indeed. Would you care to elaborate?"

McCoy bites his lip to stop himself from laughing outright. "Not really, no."

Spock hesitates for a moment, but then lets it go. Since examining him isn't going to do any good, McCoy gets to work removing the old bandage and cleaning the wound again. Most of it appears to be healing nicely, assuming that the yellowish marks around it are a sign of platelets and not infection. Though it's *much* more awkward attending to his head wound now that he's awake. McCoy tries to focus on what he's doing, but he can *feel* Spock staring at him, closely watching his every move.

"Your eyes are very blue," Spock observes.

McCoy barks out a laugh, surprised. "Thank you?"

"Surak, a famous philosopher and logician on my planet, had blue eyes." Spock looks like he is very much regretting bringing up this topic, but he continues, "On Vulcan, it is considered an honor to have eyes of that color."

For a moment, McCoy just stares at him. He doesn't know if Spock just compared him to the Vulcan equivalent of Aristotle or what, but either way he *probably* shouldn't laugh. Spock's probably not flirting either, but *damn*—he sure knows how to stroke a man's ego.

McCoy can't quite hold back his grin as he says, "Well, I'll consider it an honor, then."

Spock tilts his head slightly. "Fascinating. Do humans usually express their emotions to the degree that you do?"

McCoy's laughter tangles up in his throat. He averts his eyes, suddenly self-conscious. "Uh, yeah, I guess so. Is that not true for Vulcans?"

"It is not," Spock says. "Vulcans have extremely violent emotions—so violent that we nearly destroyed ourselves in the past because of them. Thus, we have turned to the path of logic and practice suppressing them. Surak, who I mentioned before, was the one who inspired this change."

That explains the impassivity, then. "And everyone agreed to follow him?"

Spock's eyes slide just past McCoy's ear. "No, it led to several civil wars in our past. However, the side of logic prevailed."

McCoy hums, saddened by the knowledge. "It'd be nice to think that wars don't happen everywhere, but I guess that's just not true."

Spock nods. "Unfortunately not. Our planet has been at peace since then, however."

McCoy glances at him. "So you agree with Surak?"

"I do."

"And not just because societal pressure requires that you do?"

Spock tilts his head slightly and doesn't answer.

"What about when you pick a partner, then? No emotions go into that decision?" McCoy asks, and then immediately feels silly. Why the hell was *that* the first question that popped into his mind of all things?

Spock is suddenly looking at him again, and McCoy really wishes that he wasn't. A strained silence passes for a moment before he finally says, "While some emotion may be felt, and privately expressed, most matches are based on logic."

"Should've guessed," McCoy mutters, his cheeks burning. He realizes that his hand is cradling Spock's head and Spock is looking at him with so much depth and intrigue that it startles him. He looks away, trying to be cool about the way he removes his hand. He feels like a teenager, and he scolds himself for it as he fiddles with his wad of bandages. He wraps Spock's wound,

carefully avoiding making eye contact and hoping that Spock can't see or feel how hard his heart is beating.

"Get some rest, Spock," McCoy murmurs, and then reluctantly pulls away. He still feels Spock's eyes on him as he beats a hasty retreat.

The two of them, surprisingly quickly, settle into a routine together.

Spock can't do much at first, as he's still recovering, so he sleeps during the day while McCoy is at work, and then they spend the evening together chatting and debating as McCoy cleans his wounds. McCoy starts keeping a journal of everything he discovers about Spock's physiology, curious despite himself. It's *fascinating* to learn about a completely new physiology, which he didn't think would ever be possible to do. Spock indulges him, both amused and charmed by his curiosity, if McCoy's learning to read his subtle facial expressions correctly. He answers all of his questions, teases him about differences in their physiology, and talks so much about it that McCoy easily fills up his entire journal.

Once Spock recovers enough to move around more, he starts tinkering with his technology, taste-testing things he's never seen before in McCoy's fridge, and going on walks to explore the neighborhood. The food-tasting and the walks make McCoy incredibly anxious—he could be discovered so easily, and who the hell knows *what* would happen when an onion hits that Vulcan metabolism—but he wouldn't deny Spock his curiosity, or prevent him from doing something with himself all day.

His curiosity, McCoy is learning, is one of his best traits. He's fascinated by everything, including silly things like the fact that someone delivers paper mail every day that usually contains nothing but bills and ads, or that McCoy and many other humans like to drink, in his words, 'bad-tasting beverages' simply to get intoxicated. McCoy learns a lot about Vulcan culture too, like how Vulcan children will undergo survival tests in the desert and that there's a commonly held belief in the Vulcan spirit, or *katra*.

The differences between their two cultures are astounding, but equally astounding are the similarities. They both domesticate animals, though very *different* animals, and keep them as pets in the house. They both build and live in cities, though powered by different sources. They both form governments and practice art and music and science and form friendships and relationships and families.

It's all been incredibly interesting. And in the evenings, the two of them have the *best* debates—McCoy often stays up *way* too late arguing with Spock. Their core beliefs are usually about the same, but their perspectives and approaches to those beliefs are different enough that they really get into it. McCoy argues heatedly, laughs when Spock starts teasing him instead, and has a *blast*. He's never been so invigorated by another mind before, and it's the most fun he's had in ages.

The only major change to their routine happens when McCoy comes home one day and finds that Spock has taken the television completely apart. As they're trying and failing to put it back together again, they decide that Spock needs something more concrete to occupy his time with.

Taking him to the clinic with him wasn't McCoy's *first* choice, but it's what they settle on in the end. He's nervous as hell about introducing him to Christine and Joe—if anyone could catch on that Spock's a fucking *alien*, it'd be a doctor—but they, surprisingly, don't say anything about it. Instead, they both give him knowing looks that he does not at all appreciate. Joe even has the

nerve to pat him on the back and say, "Glad to see you back in the swing of things."

McCoy's grouchiness has never affected Joe, but he tries it anyway as he snaps, "I'm not back in the swing of things, or anything else! He's just, uh … a friend."

Joe nods placatingly. "Of course he is."

McCoy grumbles, his eyes sliding to Spock. He watches him closely that first day, anxious as hell that someone will notice *something*. But, miraculously, no one does. Spock himself seems to find the whole experience fascinating. He helps around the clinic by sorting files and other paperwork, tidying up, and checking patients in when the clinic gets really busy. His favorite activity is talking to the people waiting for their appointments in the lobby, and while most seem to find him strange at first, they quickly warm up to his curious and endearing personality. McCoy also finds him endearing—he often catches himself watching him instead of doing his paperwork.

And it all feels perfectly wonderful and normal, until someone with an IUD comes into the clinic one day.

They're not seeing McCoy because of it, but while they're waiting for their appointment they somehow start philosophizing with Spock about bio-medical implants and how they relate to human health and accessibility. McCoy can hear their conversation from the room where he's preparing for their examination, but he's not really paying much attention to it until he hears Spock ask, "Do you have such an implant, Mx. Chavez?"

"Well, just an IUD, but it's still a bit weird to realize there's a piece of metal stuck in my body," they joke. After a beat of silence, and what must be a confused look from Spock, they say, "IUD stands for intrauterine device, a lot of people use them for birth control and period regulation."

"Period?"

McCoy freezes. Chavez, however, laughs, and must believe he's being intentionally obtuse. "Yeah, you know, the menstrual cycle?"

Spock's silent for a moment, and then he says, "I am familiar with the menstrual cycle, though I do not understand why you would require a device to regulate it."

All heads in the clinic turn to stare at him, including McCoy's. Chavez laughs again, though this time it sounds uncertain as they say, "You're messing with me."

Spock's eyebrow raises. "This is not, in fact, a sticky situation."

McCoy buries his face in his hands. This is quickly becoming a disaster.

"Do you live under a rock?" Chavez demands, sounding exasperated or concerned or both. "I know you're AMAB, but how could you possibly not understand that? A lot of people with a uterus have debilitating pain or messed up cycles, and dealing with that once a month is just—"

Spock looks at them with what can only be called horror. "Bleeding once a month cannot be healthy—you should speak to Doctor McCoy immediately."

McCoy hurries into the lobby. He better stop this before it gets any worse—

Chavez looks borderline furious now. "What the hell is wrong with you?! It's like you're from another planet—!"

McCoy's heart freezes in his chest. If this keeps up—

Everyone's going to find out.

Spock opens his mouth, but McCoy cuts over him, "Mx. Chavez? You can come back now, if you're ready."

They gather their things and stand, shooting Spock a bewildered look as they follow McCoy into the examination room. They question McCoy about him during their appointment, to which he only gives vague, half-panicked answers. He can't hear anyone else in the lobby talking to or about Spock, and Chavez doesn't seem overly concerned, just annoyed, but he can't quite convince himself that everything's okay.

As soon as Chavez leaves, he collapses against the counter, his breaths coming shallowly. What if Chavez starts talking to others about Spock and they become suspicious? What if they watch his every move and realize something's not quite right? What if he happens to scrape himself up somehow and they see his green blood and very obvious proof that he's *not human*? What if the government takes him away and—

He realizes he's spiraling and tries to get a grip on himself, taking deep breaths as he forces himself to focus on his work. It bothers him all day, though—he knows he's being ridiculous, but he just can't shake the anxiety of it. Spock must notice something's wrong, but he doesn't say anything, and the walk home is tense, silent.

Once they're back in the privacy of his apartment, however, the floodgates open.

"Why the hell would you say something like that?!" McCoy demands, spinning to face Spock.

Spock tilts his head slightly, obviously not understanding him. "Like what, Doctor?"

"With Chavez, the menstrual cycles!" McCoy wrings his hands together. "Everyone on Earth knows how frequent they are—someone could've suspected something!"

Spock considers this for a moment. "Perhaps. But I have found that most humans tend to dismiss that which they find strange."

McCoy scoffs loudly. "It's still not worth the risk! Why have you even been chatting with people in the lobby, anyway?"

"My original purpose in coming here was to study humans," Spock says, frowning. "It is logical to take this opportunity to immerse myself and learn as much as I can."

McCoy throws his hands up into the air. "And is it also logical to blow your cover in a small town that's suspicious of outsiders and with no way to contact your shipmates?!"

Spock at least has the good sense to look abashed. "I thought that if I endeavored to converse and behave as a human would, it would lessen their suspicion of me. It appears I may have been incorrect."

"I thought they were going to—!" McCoy cuts off, breathing hard. What *had* he thought? That someone would report Spock as an alien? That he'd be taken away and studied like some kind of lab rat? That he'd be killed or forced out into space or some other horrible fate?

All of it seems ludicrous now, but anxiety over the possibilities still lingers.

He draws a hand through his hair, agitated. "You could've been hurt!"

Spock's eyes soften. "I appreciate your concern, Doctor, but it was not necessary."

"This time! But what about next time? What if you say something that really makes it obvious you're not—!" McCoy breaks off again. He's worked himself up into such an anxious state that he can barely breathe. His heart is pounding hard in his chest and spots start to dot his vision as he struggles to get his breathing under control.

Spock suddenly places a hand on his arm. His touch is hot, hotter than a human's, but then McCoy feels a spark of something like *relaxation*. It feels like the calm that descends upon him when he's standing on a beach, warm sand between his toes, the sound of the ocean in his ears. It feels like laying in the grass on a summer's day and looking up at the blue sky, sun warm and

comforting on his skin.

He jerks away. "Jesus, what the hell was that?"

Spock considers him for a moment. "Vulcans are telepaths, doctor. Our abilities are amplified by touch, and we can use them to project and sense thoughts and emotions, as well as meld them to another's."

This is incredibly startling to McCoy in that moment. Hearts in weird places are one thing—that's not completely unheard of on Earth. But *telepathy*? That sounds like something out of a sci-fi novel, and it just heightens his inexplicable anxiety. "Well you could've mentioned that before!"

Spock blinks. "My apologies, I thought it would help you feel better."

McCoy sinks onto the couch abruptly. It *had* made him feel better, but that doesn't explain why he's still so upset. He sighs, rubbing his face with his hands. "Sorry, Spock, I think … all of this is just getting to me, suddenly."

Spock sits beside him, careful to leave some space between them. "'This'?"

"You!" McCoy gestures at him for a moment, struggling to find his words. "We get along so well sometimes I think I forget you're an *alien*. Not that we can't get along if you're an alien, but this situation shouldn't feel so *normal*. Why aren't I in constant disbelief? And I know it's silly, but it just makes me feel so—I mean, you'd tell me if I was hallucinating, wouldn't you?"

"I would," Spock says, and McCoy for the life of him can't tell if he's making fun of him. He must not be, though, for he continues seriously, "Is this why you are so upset about what happened today?"

"I guess so, I don't know." McCoy presses his palms into his eyes. "I guess it just reminded me that you could get found out, and something bad could happen to you if you do. And the idea of that is just … I can't stand it."

Spock puts a hand on his arm again, but McCoy doesn't feel any telepathic sensations this time. "I understand. I am honored that you are so concerned about my well-being."

McCoy opens one eye to peer at him. "So you don't think I'm crazy? Or paranoid?"

"On the contrary—you are a man of science," Spock says softly. "You have studied the facts and come to the logical conclusions. And perhaps you have found that those conclusions are unsettling, and require action."

McCoy smiles. "You saying I'm being logical? Now *that* I find hard to believe."

A small smile crumples in the corner of Spock's mouth. McCoy knows him well enough by now to recognize it.

He sits up with a sigh and says, "It's not that I find you unsettling, Spock. Maybe I *should*, but I don't. And I know it's not likely anyone would ever find out or think you're not human. I just tend to worry, I guess."

"It is a human failing," Spock says. Just as McCoy's about to get all riled up again, however, he adds, "and a strength."

McCoy rolls his eyes, but he finally feels calm.

They sit like that on the couch for a while, just resting together. Spock fixes McCoy some tea, a shared Vulcan and human delicacy, and the warmth and sweetness of it help McCoy relax even further. Spock's presence is comforting, too—when he came back with the tea, he sat down closer than before. The heat of him is familiar now, as is the weight of him.

McCoy basks in it, and tries not to think about how strange it all really is.

"Humans have a monthly menstrual cycle, by the way," McCoy says later, figuring Spock would want to know. Plus, it wouldn't hurt to prevent something like that incident from happening again. "It's completely normal for people with a uterus to bleed roughly once a month."

"Fascinating," Spock says, as McCoy figured he would. "Vulcans have an estrous cycle, and it is much less frequent."

McCoy sits up slightly, interested despite himself. "Really? How often do you go into heat?"

Spock raises his eyebrow at the word 'heat', but he must understand the gist for he says, "Every seven years."

McCoy laughs in disbelief. "Oh, is that all?"

Spock very stiltedly rolls his eyes at him. It's an adorable habit he's picked up from McCoy or people at the clinic or both, but he hasn't quite gotten the cadence of it right. "We do engage in sexual activities outside of that period, however."

McCoy swallows, suddenly feeling unbearably hot under his collar. There's an extremely tense moment where he's making direct eye contact with Spock, neither of them moving or saying anything. Heat and electricity jolt up McCoy's spine, but just at the last moment before he does something incredibly stupid, reason returns.

He licks his lips, breaks eye contact, and mutters, "That's not common for Earth mammals with estrous cycles."

Spock sits back, something passing through his gaze for a moment before he simply asks McCoy for more details.

They talk about science, as they usually love to do, but this time it feels forced.

The next day is Saturday, so McCoy spontaneously decides to take Spock to the aquarium.

During one of their many arguments, they'd discovered that they both share a joy and interest in biology. McCoy has always wanted to be a doctor, but in college he had also fallen in love with ecology and paleobiology. It's endlessly fascinating to learn about the variety of creatures that live on Earth and how they evolved to be, and he's kept that interest all his life.

In that particular conversation, he'd found himself deep in a tangent about ancient whales, which Spock listened to with rapt attention. He then in turn shared his knowledge about the ancient animals that inhabited Vulcan, strange creatures that McCoy could barely even imagine but filled him with that same sense of excitement and wonder.

When Spock then expressed interest in seeing more of Earth's biodiversity, McCoy decided that he should take him to the aquarium sometime. The Georgia Aquarium is the best in the country, after all.

Now that they finally have a chance to go, they arrive early—McCoy is a habitual early-riser and Spock, as a Vulcan, doesn't need as much sleep—and manage to beat most of the crowd. They start in the tropical divers exhibit, full of beautiful and wacky fish, stunning jellyfish, and friendly stingrays that swim vertically along the glass, showing off the smiles on their bellies. McCoy prattles off all the facts he knows about each species that drifts by, and they easily spend an hour in that section alone. He'd feel embarrassed about his enthusiasm if Spock wasn't hanging off of his every word and looking at him as if he's more interesting than the animals.

They move on eventually, heading into the dolphin coast exhibit. A pod of common bottlenose dolphins race past, chasing each other through the water. Spock stalls in front of them, as close to wide-eyed and gaping as McCoy has ever seen him. They watch the dolphins

for a while—McCoy has always found them playful and entertaining, and he could spend hours watching them.

Spock, it seems, feels the same way. He presses closer to McCoy and murmurs, "Vulcan has very small oceans compared to the ones on Earth. As such, we don't have a species that is even remotely like this. It is—"

"Fascinating?" McCoy supplies drily, but he's grinning from ear to ear.

"Beyond fascinating," Spock says, completely enchanted.

McCoy watches Spock, strangely finding himself more drawn to him than the dolphins. He practically glows in the blue light shining on him from the water in the exhibit, making him look beautiful and ethereal. His expression, too, is captivating—Spock regards each dolphin that swims by with such awe and reverence that McCoy is suddenly breathless. The *affection* that floods through him then is as intense as it is surprising.

… *Oh.*

He would do something as stupid as fall in love with an alien, wouldn't he?

"Remarkable," Spock breathes as the dolphins swim off to a different area of their enclosure. He turns, catching McCoy staring.

McCoy clears his throat, hopes that the heat in his cheeks isn't visible, and blurts out, "Dolphins are in the same order as whales, the modern descendents of Basilosaurus, that prehistoric whale I was telling you about before. They're highly intelligent animals."

"Evidently," Spock says, staring at the dolphins with a thoughtful expression. "It would be interesting to meld with one—do you think they would allow—?"

Choking on a laugh, McCoy grabs Spock's wrist and drags him off before he actually decides to *do* it.

They continue to wander through the various exhibits, Spock stopping to study every single fish, no matter how small. It's been a long time since McCoy's been to the aquarium with someone who matches his enthusiasm, and it's *fun.* They spend an inordinate amount of time reading the placards, and then take time to debate about them too—McCoy *swears* Spock says things just to rile him up on purpose.

The last exhibit they stop at is the shark exhibit. It's one of the main reasons why the aquarium is the best in the country, so McCoy had made sure to save it for last. They enter the huge room and are suddenly surrounded by sharks on all sides. There's even a tank above them, and they tilt their heads back in awe as hammerhead sharks pass over them, as if they were swimming across the sky.

This has always been McCoy's favorite exhibit, and he's perhaps a little too excited as he leans into Spock to get his attention.

"Look, that's a whale shark!" McCoy exclaims, gesturing at the majestic creature swimming leisurely above them. "It's the largest fish that's ever lived on this planet, as far as we know. Because it's so huge, though, and its skeleton is made out of cartilage, not bone, they don't fossilize well, so we don't have a very accurate record of their ancestry. For all we know, there very well could've been even bigger fish that just weren't preserved—!"

He's cut off by Spock gently grabbing his hand, entwining their fingers, and stepping closer to kiss him. McCoy's words strangle in his throat—he's so shocked that, for a moment, all he can do is stand there.

Spock pulls back slightly. "Forgive me, have I overstepped? I observed other humans

performing this gesture, and I thought—"

"No, no, you're right!" McCoy hurries to interrupt. "Assuming you, uh, meant to say that you … fancy me."

Spock opens his mouth, but McCoy barrels on, too embarrassed to elaborate on that, "I was just surprised, is all. I kinda thought it was just … me."

Spock's eyes soften as he reaches up to cup McCoy's face in his hands. "You have captivated me since the moment I woke up in your apartment."

McCoy's breath catches. "…That long?"

Spock nods. "It did not seem logical to mention it before, as I believed I would not be staying long. However, it seems increasingly likely that I will be living on Earth for some time. I no longer wish to deny how important you are to me."

Before McCoy can even begin to process that, a small smirk folds in the corner of Spock's mouth. "Besides, lately I have found you quite irresistible when you speak about paleobiology."

McCoy laughs, a happy little bubbly laugh that he doesn't think he's uttered in *years*. He's smiling so hard his cheeks hurt as he leans in to kiss Spock properly this time. They get lost in it, briefly in their own little world with sharks swimming all around them.

"You've been important to me for a long time, too, Spock," McCoy whispers when they part for air. He laughs at himself and continues, "I just, uh, didn't realize until about ten minutes ago, when you were looking at those dolphins like they were the best things in the universe."

Spock presses his forehead against McCoy's. "Second best, perhaps."

McCoy flushes *darkly*, flustered as Spock squeezes his hand and kisses him again.

They end up spending the most amount of time in the shark exhibit, though this time it's not because they're talking about the animals.

On the way out, they hit the gift shop, where McCoy buys Spock a sea otter hat to cover his ears. Spock puts it on outside in the parking lot, and McCoy has to bite his lip to keep from laughing once it's in place. How someone can be so damn cute and so utterly ridiculous at the same time is beyond him, but he adores it. He kisses him right between the otter's furry paws, curled around his cheeks like a chin strap, the fur soft against his skin.

Spock kisses him back, and they forget the rest of the world completely until an angry minivan owner honks their horn obnoxiously at them.

Smiling, McCoy drags Spock back to the car, leans over the stick shift, and picks up right where they left off.

They sleep in the same bed that night, wanting to be close but neither of them quite ready to cross the barrier that is *how the hell would their biology work together*. McCoy lays with his head on Spock's shoulder, comforted by the slow thumping of his heart against his back. He still hasn't gotten used to the strange heart rate, but he's reassured now that he knows it's normal for him. The intense heat of Spock's body is also strange, but incredibly relaxing, like being under a heated blanket in the heart of winter.

McCoy snuggles into him, pressing his face into the crook of Spock's neck. Spock draws his fingers through McCoy's hair with one hand while the other rests on the exposed skin of McCoy's stomach where his shirt has ridden up. McCoy has always noticed how tactile Spock is with everything, and it makes him hum deep in his bones to feel this intimacy now.

However, he's also now remembering the last time he shared a bed with someone, and his mood sours slightly.

Spock shifts, resting his chin on McCoy's head. "Leonard?"

McCoy can't for the life of him figure out how Spock sensed his mood change until he remembers—right, touch telepathy. He sighs and puts his hand over Spock's, careful to avoid what he now knows are erogenous zones. "I was just thinking about my ex-wife."

"I did not know you were married."

"I don't really like to think about it—she left me not too long ago," McCoy murmurs. "Took everything I was, including my daughter. I mean, it was my own damn fault, but I think that just makes it worse."

Spock doesn't say anything, giving space for McCoy to find his words. "I guess I just—well, I don't know. I worry about it happening again. And I know we're not married, and that you might return to Vulcan someday, but I'm worried I'll fuck it all up, is all I'm saying."

Spock considers this for a moment, absentmindedly pressing kisses into McCoy's hair. "I had a similar experience, though we did not have a child. We were arranged to marry when we were very young, but when the time came, she chose another."

McCoy winces. "That sucks, Spock. I'm sorry."

"I take full responsibility for it—I did not put in the effort required to make the relationship work. So based on that, I believe I have an equally likely chance of 'ruining this', wouldn't you say?"

McCoy blinks, surprised, but Spock continues before he can say anything, "All relationships require effort to ensure their success, and new ones are mostly unrelated to mistakes we made in the past. So, perhaps we should just focus our efforts on learning from our past mistakes and making this one work as best as we can."

McCoy rolls over so that he's facing Spock. They consider each other for a moment, and then McCoy smiles softly. "Okay, let's try it."

It's probably a bad idea, and they both know it, but in that moment, it feels *right*.

Somehow, this new relationship fits perfectly into their old routine.

They wake up together instead of apart, wrapped up in each other in the bed that has very quickly become *their* bed. They eat breakfast together, and then McCoy goes to work. Spock joins him at the clinic on most days, but sometimes he instead spends his time tinkering with his equipment or exploring the town. On the weekends, they travel or go to places and events around town that don't exist or work differently on Vulcan. They fit in time to kiss or cuddle in between, showing each other how to be intimate in both Vulcan and human ways. And in the evenings, they still have their beloved debates. They finally get past that pesky anatomy barrier during one such debate, and then quickly add that into their normal schedule as well.

It's all been *wonderful*, so wonderful that McCoy almost forgets that it could end at any moment.

Then one day, Spock is tinkering with his communicator in the dining room as always when tinny static actually pops through the speakers. Then, a voice. McCoy can't understand any of what it's saying except for one word that he hears clearly: *Spock*.

Spock listens to the voice intently, and then says simply, "I understand. I will contact you shortly."

He clicks the communicator shut, and then turns to face McCoy. They stare at each other, and dread drops like lead into McCoy's stomach. "Was that one of your colleagues?"

"Yes—they said it took 3.86 months just for one of their scouting ships to discover the remnants of our destroyed ship, and that of my shuttle. Another ship is currently en route to meet me."

"… Oh." And that's all McCoy can seem to say on the subject. He feels paralyzed, far away, disconnected from himself.

Spock stands and takes a step towards him. "Leonard—"

"Well, we should probably get your things packed," McCoy says hurriedly, turning away to face the table with all of Spock's equipment on it. He feels numb, hollow, but there's a distinct pressure pushing at the back of his eyes. "Where are they going to meet you? The shuttle's probably unrecognizable at this point, but I'm sure we can—"

"Leonard," Spock interrupts gently, putting his hand on McCoy's shoulder. "I am not leaving."

McCoy blinks, his mind grinding to a complete halt. He turns to look at Spock again, uncomprehending. "What? But they're—"

Spock cups his face in his warm, warm hands. "I wish to remain with you, Leonard."

McCoy just gapes at him. Despite all the words that always seem to flow so easily between them, right now, in this critical moment, he's completely speechless.

Spock's eyes tighten, something like sadness reflected in their dark pools. "Unless you wish for me to leave."

"No, I—!" McCoy manages before the words get all tangled up in his throat again. His ex-wife's words ring in his ears:

We're both selfish, she'd said right before she left, sadness tugging at the corners of her eyes and mouth. *And those selfish needs just aren't lining up anymore.*

McCoy swallows. He wants to be selfish—how *badly* he wants to be selfish. But how can he be, when this is Spock's chance to go home? "I don't want you to leave, but what about your home, your life on Vulcan? You're seriously telling me that you want to give all that up just to be with *me*—"

"Yes," Spock says, so assuredly that it startles McCoy, "that is exactly what I am telling you."

"But—but that's crazy!"

Spock presses his forehead against his. "No, it is logical."

And McCoy *still* can't believe it. He flounders, suddenly flustered by how close they are. "But—I—you—!"

"My life on Vulcan is nothing worth going back for," Spock continues, rubbing his thumbs just below McCoy's eyes. "And how can I continue my work, studying humans, if I am 16.238 light years from Earth? Besides, this will not be my only chance to go home. As long as I get a functioning communicator from the ship that is en route, I can call anyone on Vulcan at any time."

McCoy's heart is pounding so loudly in his ears that he can barely hear. He swallows, and asks, "But what if someone here finds out that you're an alien?"

"Then we will decide what to do if and when that occurs." A wry smile finds a home in the corner of Spock's mouth. "Also, I happen to know a doctor who can heal me, should the need arise."

McCoy grabs onto Spock's wrists. That same pressure is pressing up against the back of his eyes again, but this time it isn't from sadness—it's from hope, elation, *love.*

"You want to stay?" he asks again. He has to hear it one more time.

Spock presses a kiss to McCoy's fingers. "I want to stay."

McCoy searches Spock's face, finds nothing but earnestness there, and then rushes in to kiss him on the lips. Spock hums, opening his mouth for him as his hands slide back into McCoy's hair. They get lost in it, each other, as both of them have from the moment they first met.

"I love you, Spock," McCoy whispers when they have to break for air. "I know that's kinda human of me to say, but—"

Spock kisses him again, hungrily, and McCoy's whole body hums from the force of it. Even he, overthinker that he is, can't misunderstand this. It may be expressed differently in their two cultures, but it's the exact same damn feeling. McCoy responds just as eagerly, placing his hand over Spock's heart as he shoves him back against the wall.

He makes Spock late for meeting his colleagues, but that doesn't seem to matter very much at the moment.

They have all the time in the universe.

Twenty-eight years before Zefram Cochrane would complete his warp drive engine and a ship full of Vulcans would land to greet him, a Vulcan lives in Georgia.

A year ago, they'd moved out of their apartment into a tiny, modest house. It'd been getting too cramped in the old place with both of their various paleobiology and physics experiments piling up and all of the stray cats that Spock can't seem to resist bringing home. Plus, the house is close to the clinic and where Spock now works as a programmer. (McCoy doesn't know where he got his forged documents from and he doesn't ask.) Since moving in, they've started a garden out front, set up an outdoor enclosure for their cats in the back, and relish in the bed that's much bigger than what could've fit back in the apartment.

They also have their friends over. Spock's met and befriended all of McCoy's friends—particularly Jim, the fisherman who seems to forget that his port isn't *actually* located at the bar counter McCoy installed in their new home. The three of them often spend time together, gallivanting around the oceans and national parks and exploring the world around them.

They've met each other's families, though McCoy had to settle for meeting Spock's parents over a very tiny, very grainy screen. Their families get along surprisingly well, which had pleased them both. McCoy even has an open invitation from Spock's unfairly attractive father to visit Vulcan whenever he can work up the nerve to *leave the planet.*

He doesn't know if he'll ever be ready for that, but who knows. He can't very well live his life and not see those teddy bears with six-inch fangs for himself.

For now, though, Earth is home. No one's found out about Spock being an alien yet, and very slowly, McCoy stops worrying about it. They've even *met another Vulcan* of all damn things—an old man by the name of Mestral lives just up the block from them, having moved there after learning that McCoy is quite capable of treating a Vulcan. Apparently Spock's not the only one who crash-landed on Earth and fell in love with a human, encouraging him to stick around long after he would've been rescued. They have dinner with him and his wife once a week, where Spock and Mestral enjoy speaking their native tongue and McCoy and Maggie get *way* too competitive in their games of poker.

And their life is good. They're deliriously happy together, to the point that McCoy wonders what he was even doing with himself before he met Spock. Life is just so much *better* with him in it.

That night, just like any other night, McCoy lets the cats out into their enclosure and then joins Spock in the yard with his telescope. McCoy had bought it for him for his birthday last year, a human tradition that had greatly perplexed Spock, but the gift was accepted nonetheless. McCoy had thought that Spock would enjoy the chance to study the stars, like he did before he came to Earth, and he was right—Spock spends nearly every night that it's clear out in the backyard with the telescope.

McCoy sidles up behind him, wrapping his arms around his waist and pressing a kiss to the back of his neck. Spock shivers slightly—McCoy knows full well the sensitivity of Vulcan necks, and usually takes advantage of it.

Graciously, he restrains himself tonight. "Anything interesting?"

"Always," Spock says, stepping aside so McCoy can look into the telescope. "A red supergiant star, dubbed as Betelgeuse by humans, went supernova in the Earth year 2025—you can see the remnants of that phenomenon quite clearly today."

"Woah…" McCoy says, peering into the lens. Then he asks, as he does every time, "Can you see Vulcan from here?"

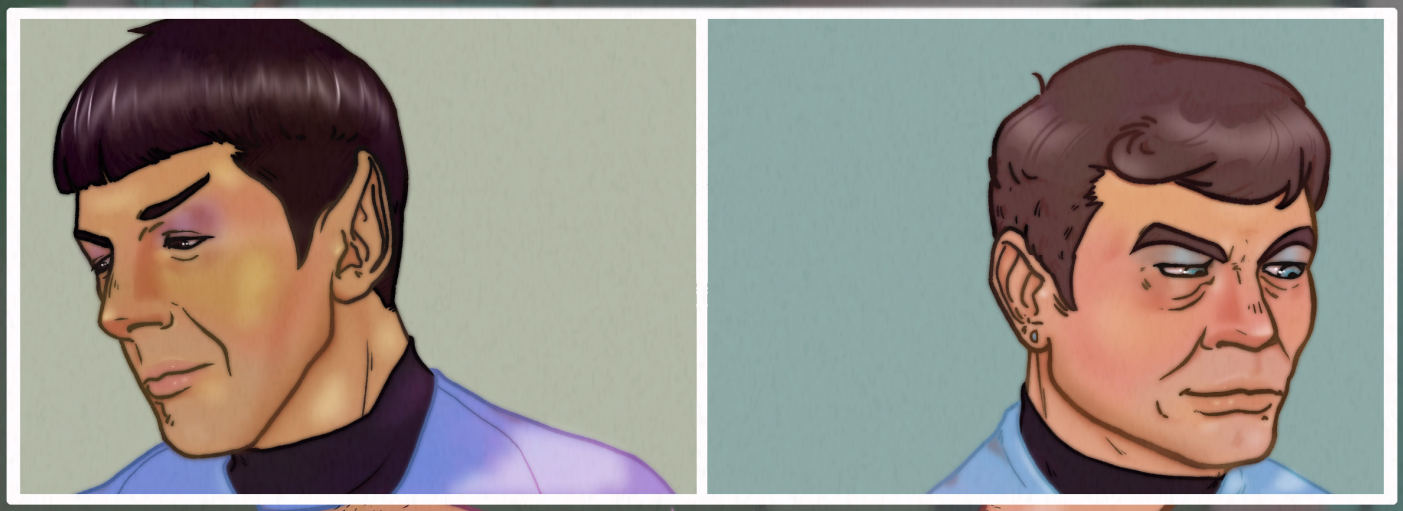
Spock touches his cheek fondly before tilting the telescope. "That is our sun, 40 Eridani A, though you know, of course, that we cannot see the planet itself from Earth."

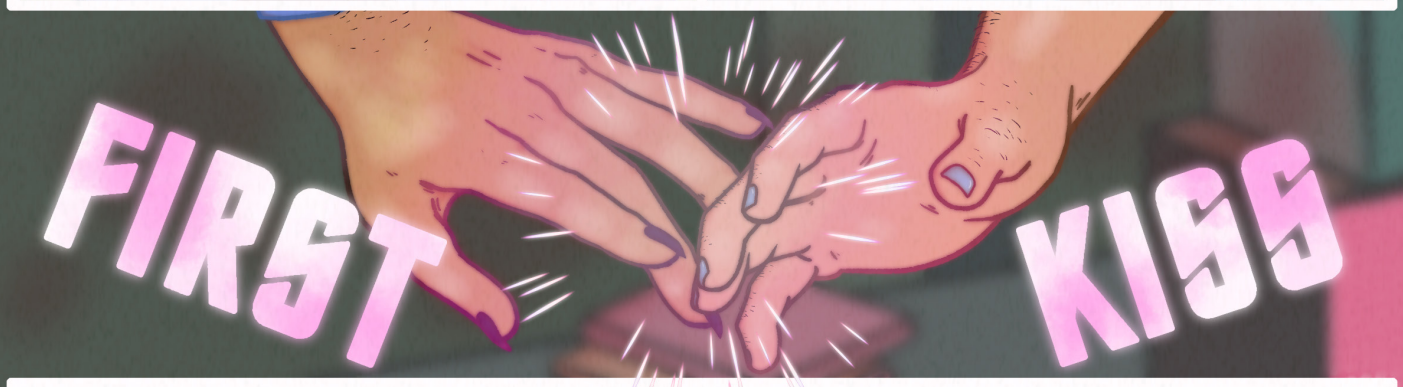
McCoy does know that, but he enjoys looking for it and imagining he can see it, anyway. Besides, the star's beautiful enough to warrant looking at it every time he's able—from Georgia, 40 Eridani A is only visible in winter.

Spock steps up behind him, pressing his face into the crook of McCoy's neck. McCoy rests his hands on Spock's when Spock wraps his arms around him, leaning back into the safety and warmth of his embrace.

They spend the evening, and all evenings after, tangled up together and watching the stars.

★✚★✚★

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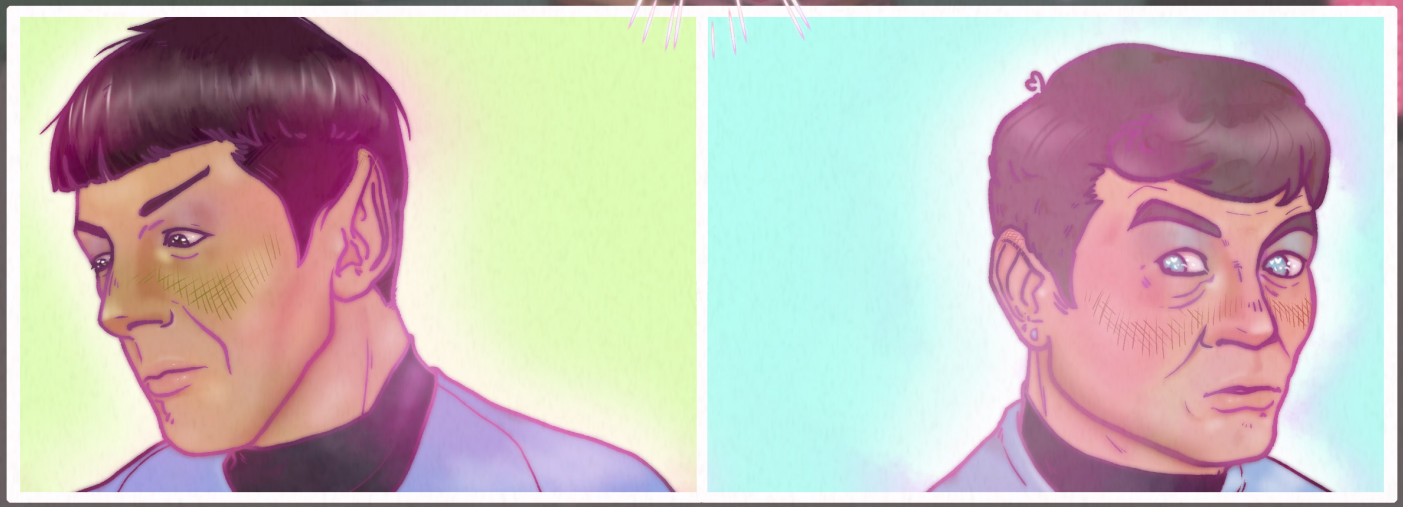
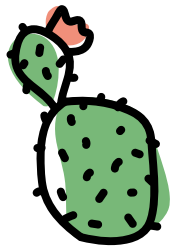


Argos

by Misfit



Leonard had never had occasion to visit Vulcan before its destruction at Nero's hands, but he knew the basics: endless red sand deserts, scorching winds, zero moons, and countless sprawling metropolises. New Vulcan was much the same in many respects. Still a desert planet, still relentlessly hot, and still without a moon. It lacked the giant cities, but those would appear with time, no doubt. It was very much a work in progress, an effort to rebuild what had been so violently taken. As Leonard stepped off the shuttlecraft and glanced at Spock, both of them still clad in their Starfleet blue and standing out against the sands like an oasis, he hoped that it felt like home to the Vulcan, even just the ghost of one.

Spock had not spoken to Leonard during the entire shuttle trip from the *Enterprise*. It wasn't a cold silence, but it hung heavy with things unspoken. Spock had spent much of it staring out at the stars, watching as the dark of space lightened and gave way to sapphire skies. Leonard had spent it watching Spock, wondering if he was overstepping but assuring himself that if he was, the Vulcan wouldn't hesitate to let him know.

Leonard shifted the pack filled with a week's worth of clothes slung over his shoulder to a better angle and coughed as the dry desert air tickled his throat. The noise brought Spock's eyes to him.

"You did not need to accompany me, Doctor. Your presence could be required on Inavar Prime."

Leonard scoffed. "Don't think the CMO needs to oversee trade negotiations." In a quieter tone, he added, "Besides, you shouldn't have to do this alone, Spock."

Spock held his gaze, eyes sharpening. "If you offered your presence out of a sense of duty, I can assure you it was not necessary. There is no need to inconvenience yourself." He made a gesture with one hand to the shuttlecraft still parked behind them, waiting for a signal to leave. "The *Galileo* can return you to the ship promptly."

Leonard sighed. Spock was on edge; it was easy to see with his sharper tone, stiffer

posture, and the furrow to his brow that hadn't eased for days, not since Spock had gotten the message from his father informing him that I-Chaya was dying. "I'm here because I want to be here, Spock. It's not an inconvenience. Jim would be here, too, if he wasn't explicitly required elsewhere." Leonard didn't mention Nyota, who would have joined as well if the relationship between the two wasn't still a bit strained after the break-up a few months prior. "I know you'll never admit it, so I'll say it for you. You're upset, and that's okay. I'm here for you if you need me. If not, well, Jim has been hounding me for months about shore leave anyhow. I can do my own thing."

Spock's gaze remained hard, but after a moment, he looked away. With a sigh, he shook his head, dark hair fluttering in the reddening evening light. "This should not affect me so much." It was muttered to himself, but Leonard could still hear the words. He had a lot to say to that sentiment but knew it would not be appreciated at the moment, so he left them unsaid.

Leonard gave two raps to the side of the *Galileo* in the silence, and the doors closed, and the engine whirred to life. The two stepped away as the shuttle lifted up into the sky, watching as it shrank to nothing in the distance.

Without a word, Spock began the trek towards the estate they had landed beside. Leonard hastened to catch up, boots slipping in the sand.

★✚★✚★

Sarek met them at the gate, exchanged the driest of pleasantries, and then departed on a diplomatic errand he stated would take all week. Leonard knew Sarek would be leaving; it was one of the many reasons he'd made sure to accompany Spock, but it was still a bit of a shock to see the man go. It shouldn't be, as from the bits and pieces of secondhand knowledge he had of Spock's father, he knew the man to be avoidant at the best of times. Spock seemed to expect it, saying goodbye instead of hello. But Leonard heard Sarek's words for what they were: a poor excuse not to be around his son in any kind of emotional state. It made Leonard's blood boil.

After showing Leonard to his quarters, Spock went elsewhere in the estate, leaving him to unpack. The task only took a few minutes; he hadn't really brought much besides clothes and a PADD. Still, he stayed in his quarters for a few hours to give Spock some time with I-Chaya. The room was sparsely furnished but pleasant, with warm clay-coloured walls and light, airy curtains over the windows. Leonard settled at the desk set against one wall to read some new medical research articles he had been meaning to get to for ages. Being the CMO of the *Enterprise* did not really leave much time for personal study. Eventually, after skimming the same sentence five times in a row and still not parsing the meaning, Leonard admitted to himself it was time to check on Spock.

The estate was sprawling, all one level, and made of a light clay stone that reflected back the heat of the sun. It was well into the night now, though, and the temperature was finally at a tolerable level for Leonard, though he knew it would be quite chilly to a Vulcan. Wandering through the halls and hoping he would be led in the right direction by divine intervention, he finally peeked around a corner and found what he was looking for.

While, in theory, he knew that sehlats were large creatures, Leonard hadn't fully realized what that would translate to when seeing one indoors. The massive, furred beast took up a

sizable portion of what he assumed to be the living room, with the furniture having been moved around to give the sehlat as much space as possible. At first glance, it looked for all the world like a large teddy bear had been shoved unceremoniously inside a dollhouse and forgotten about.

Glancing around the room, Leonard noted the decorative tapestries hung on the walls, a low set table and a myriad of cushions on the floor shoved to one side, a grand harp in one corner, and what appeared to be a meditation alcove in another. A blanket had been laid on the ground for I-Chaya, and bowls of food and water had been set close by. Next to the sehlat, kneeling with one hand settled in the creature's dark brown fur and the other balled into a fist in his lap, was Spock.

Ever the medical student, Leonard also took a moment to study the sehlat. I-Chaya appeared to be a cross between a grizzly bear and a lion, both animals Leonard had only ever seen depicted in textbooks, just with sizeable fangs added in as a bonus. The situation felt surreal, like he had stepped through a wormhole and gone back hundreds of years to when such creatures roamed the Earth in droves. But this was New Vulcan and the sehlat was not stuck in the ancient past but very much a creature of the present. I-Chaya locked eyes with Leonard, and a low growl emanated from the sehlat's throat as he bared his sharp teeth. Thankfully, he made no move to get up from where he lay against the far wall. Perhaps, in his old age, he simply couldn't stand anymore.

Spock startled at the sound and whipped his head first to I-Chaya, then to whoever was causing the sehlat's anger. Spock noted Leonard's presence by the door and immediately moved to murmur something in I-Chaya's ear. Whatever he said, it calmed the sehlat, who went from flattened ears and whipping tail to placid and sleepy once more. When Spock noted that I-Chaya was no longer on alert, he gestured for Leonard to enter the room.

"What did you say to him?" Leonard asked as he cautiously made his way forward, stopping at what he hoped was not within pouncing distance, heart still beating with adrenaline. He had raised his hands unknowingly at some point in the universal *I come in peace gesture* and kept them there, just in case.

Spock deliberated before answering, fingers running idly through I-Chaya's fur. "That you are a friend. There is no need to defend himself or me against you."

"Ah," Leonard said, the adrenaline quickly being replaced by warmth. It wasn't often Spock admitted to having friends, and he was glad to be counted among them. "He can understand you that well?"

Spock nodded, gaze turning back to the now dozing creature. "Well enough. Sehlats are highly intelligent." Glancing back and seeing Leonard still frozen in the middle of the room, hands raised, Spock added, "You may approach, he will not attack." If Leonard didn't know any better, he could swear there was a hint of amusement in his tone.

Bundling up as much bravery as Leonard could muster, he snagged one of the cushions on the floor and set it on the other side of I-Chaya's head. He settled down with his legs crossed, knowing full well that if he kneeled like Spock, his knees would hate him for days.

Up close, it was easier to look past the immediate looming presence and see the marks that time had wrought on the sehlat. While the fur on his body was a rich dark brown, the fur on his face had greyed, some patches even turning white. When he opened his eyes, they were unfocused, milky with cataracts, and his large fangs were cracked and chipped. Each

breath seemed a struggle, the lungs only half filling before emptying with a wheeze.

"How is he?" Leonard asked, unthinking, then winced at the question. The answer was clear to see.

Spock noted the reaction. "There is no need to avoid speaking of the situation, Doctor. I-Chaya is old and dying. He is as well as he can be."

Leonard nodded, rubbing his hands together for lack of anything to do with them, hoping that if he kept his mouth shut, nothing else insensitive would fall out. Being the CMO of the *Enterprise* did not really prepare one for attending deathbeds. Death on starships was normally quick and violent. He hadn't seen someone die of old age since he was very small, visiting his grandmother in her hospital bed and wondering why she couldn't play with him anymore. He'd never had a pet, either. His parents hadn't wanted any, and he was separated from Jocelyn before he'd ever really thought about getting one with her.

Lost in thought, Leonard started when he felt a warm weight fall on his fidgeting hands, stilling their nervous movements. Surprised, he looked down to see Spock resting his hand over Leonard's for a moment before grasping one of them in his and moving it to lay on I-Chaya's snout.

"He enjoys having his chin scratched," Spock said, leaving his hand settled over Leonard's for a breath before letting it fall away.

The sehlat observed the hand on his snout before giving a heavy sigh and closing his eyes. Hesitantly, gaze shifting between I-Chaya's mouth and paws in case danger came from either, Leonard moved his hand to nestle in the fur under I-Chaya's snout and gave a few good scratches. The sehlat's fur was softer than Leonard had imagined. Definitely roughened with age, but still silken to the touch and warm.

A deep rumble began that, at first, Leonard thought was the beginning of another growl. It took a moment to place what it actually was. I-Chaya was purring.

A chuckle escaped Leonard, and he brought up his other hand to cover more ground. The rumble turned into rolls of thunder, strong enough that he could feel the vibrations through his arms.

"You're just a big softie," Leonard murmured, and the sehlat seemed to agree, adjusting his head to give Leonard a better scratching angle.

"He is," Spock said, voice rough.

Leonard looked back at Spock, surprised the Vulcan would agree to his statement without any contradiction. He had been expecting a quip, perhaps a reminder that sehlats had been apex predators on Vulcan and therefore could not be classified as soft. When Leonard saw the shine to Spock's eyes and the white-knuckled grip he held in I-Chaya's fur, the beginnings of the gentle retort he was about to make died on his lips. Now wasn't the time for that.

The three sat in a circle in the room as the night bled into morning, enjoying each other's company.

★✚★✚★

Two days passed peacefully, with Spock and Leonard spending nearly all of it in the living room together with I-Chaya. Leonard caught up on reading and discovered all the ways a sehlat liked to be scratched. Spock spent much of it quiet, either meditating in the corner alcove or resting against I-Chaya's side, lost in thought.

The nights were much the same, with Leonard dragging a pile of sheets into the room and hunkering down despite how much his back would hate him come daytime. Spock didn't sleep, despite Leonard's protests, and instead kept vigil.

When the sun rose on the third day, I-Chaya was gone. His last breath had been taken in his sleep, surrounded by love.

★✚★✚★

It wasn't until the stars had blinked into being in the night sky that Leonard saw Spock again. Not for lack of trying, of course. But the Vulcan kept busy and out of the estate the whole day making preparations for I-Chaya's body, and Leonard didn't want to follow him around like a shadow and add any difficulty to what was already a trying time. So, Leonard sat in his borrowed room and tried to focus on the current article at the top of his to-read pile, mind nowhere near calm enough to retain a word of it.

Then, a knock at the door, three gentle taps that echoed in the quiet. Leonard jumped off the cushion he was curled up on and answered it. Spock was on the other side, cradling a large clay urn.

"Would you wish to assist me in spreading I-Chaya's ashes in the garden?" Spock asked, his voice holding a tremor that Leonard wasn't used to hearing from the Vulcan. Be it from exhaustion, grief, or a tangled web of both, it signaled just how hard Spock was taking all of it. Leonard's heart choked on the sound.

"Of course, Spock," Leonard said, "I'd be honored to."

The pair made their way to the back of the estate, where a sprawling garden had taken root. Leonard had only caught just a glimpse of it when they first arrived three days ago, shrubbery peeking over stone walls. Stepping out into the cool night air of the desert, Leonard marveled at the abundance of flora cast aglow in the solar lamps scattered along the winding walkways. It all appeared to be arid-adapted varieties of one sort or another, born to thrive in the harsh climate. Thorny bushes and spiked cacti, waxy leaves, and masses of tiny flowers wafted a heady scent.

"My father keeps it in honour of my mother. She enjoyed gardening. It is not as extensive as the one she cultivated on Vulcan, but it is a worthy memorial," Spock said, heading towards a stand of towering cacti and kneeling at their base.

Leonard followed, watching as Spock took the lid off the urn and produced two small trowels. One, he handed to Leonard, and the other, he used to scoop ash from within the urn and began scattering it near the roots of the plant. Leonard hesitated, unsure if it was truly his place, but soon shook his head and knelt alongside Spock. He would not have been invited if Spock did not want him there.

"It's beautiful," Leonard said, senses filled with nature and life.

"It is," Spock agreed.

They moved through the garden, Spock recounting notable vignettes of I-Chaya's antics, Leonard laughing softly, and trowels working to till the rocky soil and spread the ashes. It took perhaps an hour, the two working carefully, reverently. Once the urn was empty, they set aside their tools and sat on a bench that had been put in the very centre of the vegetation, a hidden sanctuary.

Spock was quiet. He had fallen completely silent towards the end of their work and

now sat still, gaze on his hands in his lap.

Leonard leaned back, taking in the night sky, trying to think of something to say to help distract them both. "Can't believe how bright the stars are here. Puts the Milky Way to shame."

Spock nodded after a moment, voice distant sounding, looking up to gaze at the stars. "The lack of a moon allows fainter starlight to reach the eye."

The pair fell silent again, eyes darting amidst the universe. It was a comfortable quiet, though, the kind brought on by tired hearts too full to speak but consoled by the presence of another.

A bird darted overhead, crossing the stars, disturbed from its sleep by something in the night and seeking safety elsewhere. The sound of wingbeats stirred Spock from his stillness.

"My mother presented me with I-Chaya when I was seven years of age. She hoped to provide me with a companion that I was lacking in my peers. He grew to be my closest confidant." He spoke in a hushed tone but with a ring of resolve. "I was not able to say goodbye to my mother, but saying goodbye to I-Chaya felt, in a way, as though I was saying it to them both. Despite the burden of loss, I am more at peace now than I have been in a long time."

Leonard nodded, not speaking just yet, seeing Spock wanted to say more but was taking his time to find the words.

"When I left Vulcan, I did not hold many regrets. I wished to join Starfleet, to better myself. It was a logical decision. But in doing so, I left I-Chaya behind. I did not believe I would find another that I could count as a close companion. But I was wrong." As Spock spoke, he drifted forward so their legs brushed at the knee. "I found the crew of the *Enterprise*. I found Nyota, Hikaru, Pavel, Scotty. I found Jim. And I found you."

Leonard's heart started beating fast, pounding in his chest at the words. At the way Spock looked in the starlight, cast in silver.

"You challenge me, intrigue me, provide comfort and stability. Thank you, Leonard. Your company is invaluable." Spock glanced down at the hands on his lap, moving them so they rested overtop Leonard's. The touch was warm. He looked up once more, dark eyes aglow.

Giving Leonard all the warning to back away, Spock slowly closed the distance between them. Their lips pressed together once, chaste, the barest brush, yet containing so much emotion Leonard felt like he would bubble over. Spock pulled back but left his hands over Leonard's, waiting for a response.

Leonard cleared his throat, a war between his own wants and needs occurring in his chest. He wanted nothing more than to press his hand to the back of Spock's neck and bring them back together, but he needed to know if this was something Spock truly wanted.

"Spock, you're important to me, too." Leonard couldn't help the smile pulling at his lips as he spoke. "You're always able to pull me out of whatever grumpy hole I've dug myself. And I want this, if you do." Leonard twisted his hands so they were facing up towards Spock's and grabbed on, holding tight. "But I need to know. Are you okay? Is this something you want right now?"

Spock looked down at their intertwined hands, squeezing back without hesitation.

"I'Chaya's death has not clouded my judgement, but rather clarified it. If I can live my life with one less regret, then I wish to do so." Spock looked back up, a hint of a Vulcan smile on his lips. "I have wanted this for some time, but did not want to risk our friendship to pursue it. I did not think the risk logical. Now I know the concern was unfounded."

Leonard looked into Spock's eyes, darted between them, and saw the surety there and the warmth. He knew his own gaze reflected the same. A soft chuckle bubbled up from his chest, and he let his wants run wild now that his needs had been met. Bringing up one hand to nestle in the hair at the back of Spock's neck, Leonard pulled him close. Their next kiss was filled with affection and the promise of a lifetime of companionship.

Under the bright stars, the pair grieved what had been lost and looked towards the future.

★✚★✚★

Failures in Communication

by DahYelTal

"So," Jim said as he clapped Leonard hard across the shoulder, "your first anniversary is tomorrow. Do you have anything special planned?"

Leonard blinked slowly and dropped his meal tray to the table with a clatter. No, he most certainly didn't have anything planned because he had completely lost track of time. He admitted that time was flying by, especially with how close they were to the end of their five-year mission, but the main reason Leonard didn't think about the date was because it'd felt like they'd already spent a lifetime together. Spock fit so nicely into his life that it felt like they'd always been together. That Spock had already been home to Momma, and Jo approved—she did, but not in person—and they'd been married fifty years despite not even being forty.

Was it really their first anniversary already? Only the first anniversary?

"I take it you don't have anything planned?" Jim teased as he stole Leonard's parfait.

Leonard stole it back and sat down with a grumble, shoving his face in his hands. "No, I didn't even realize how close we were."

"Sucks to be you," Jim hummed. He took a bite of his pancakes before nonchalantly waving his fork in Leonard's face. "You have nearly twenty-four hours to plan a spectacular date, though. Unless you think Spock is planning something?"

"He'd have said something if he was, he's practical like that." If Jim could have lifted a singular eyebrow, he would have, though Leonard didn't know why. Jim knew Spock as well as he did. Although more romantic than Leonard had ever thought, Spock had never intentionally surprised Leonard with anything. All dates were prearranged, though they had the occasional spontaneous date after a lab sess— *I got it. I know exactly what I'm gonna do!*

"You should still check with Spock," Jim advised before stuffing more pancakes into his mouth.

Leonard shrugged. "Like I said, he'd have told me if he had something planned. Do Vulcans even celebrate dating anniversaries?"

"Lucky you, we have someone who knows that on board this very ship!" Jim grinned. "Want me to ask her?"

"No, thank you, Jimmy," Leonard said with an eye roll. "I've relied on Nyota far too much this year, it's time I start relying on my own experiences."

"I mean, it's not like you two aren't friends." Jim pushed Leonard's plate toward him, reminding him to eat. "I'm sure she'd help if you asked her."

Leonard waved it off, picked up his fork, and pointed it at Jim. "I got it covered, Jimmy. Now if you'd stop ramblin', I can start eating."

"I'm almost finished, you can't blame me for your slow eating."

"Yes, I can."

"Well, it's not true."

"Says you!" Leonard emphasized his point by stealing back the parfait Jim had stolen again at some point and devoured it swiftly.

"Hey, I was going to eat that, Bones!" Jim whined, falling back into their usual routine.

Leonard volleyed back with the regular retort: "Go get your own, then!"

They finished their breakfast with gentle jabs and food stealing, parting ways at the nearest turbolift. Jim would head to the bridge, and Leonard would head down to sickbay for inventorying...and anniversary planning.

★✚★✚★

"Spock! Just the guy I was looking for." The captain squeezed Spock's shoulder as he came up from behind and fell into step.

"Captain," Spock greeted, unsure whether the captain intended to start a social or work conversation. Spock predicted it would be social based on his demeanor and overly friendly physical displays. However, it was more pragmatic to greet him formally, as it would be acceptable in either outcome.

"No need to be so formal, Spock! We aren't on the bridge yet," Jim said as he increased his speed in order to reach the turbolift first. "I didn't see you at breakfast, is everything alright?"

Now, knowing the nature of Jim's interaction, Spock relaxed his posture and tone. As well as his list of social scripts. "I had a project that I was preparing for this morning."

"Oh, are you planning an anniversary date for Bones?" Jim clapped Spock's shoulder and shook it in his exuberance. "I knew it!"

"Our..." Spock paused, and his many synapses—more than Leonard and Jim's combined—started sending signals in quick succession. "Our anniversary."

"You forgot, didn't you?" Jim said with a jovial tone. While Spock was embarrassed for his oversight, it must not have been a great offense if Jim was so cavalier about it. "It's fine, Bones wasn't sure that Vulcans celebrated anniversaries anyway."

"While Vulcans do not celebrate anniversaries as humans do, we still reflect on and acknowledge the importance of our relationships in regular intervals." Spock's brow furrowed as he tried to remember when he last performed a satisfactory acknowledgment. *However, Vulcans who are in relationships with humans indulge in their cultural practices.* "I thank you for bringing this misconception to my attention."

"No problem, Spock." Jim smiled and stepped into the turbolift that had just arrived. "You should talk with Bones, though."

Spock followed Jim into the turbolift and commanded it to go to the bridge. "I do not believe that will be necessary." He chose not to elaborate, given Jim's close relationship with Leonard. Spock's partner adored grand romantic gestures, and he did not wish to risk the surprise if Jim were to find out and inadvertently expose him.

"Suit yourself," Jim mumbled uncharacteristically. "Well, let's get the day started, shall we?"

"Yes, Captain," Spock replied formally. "Preliminary reports suggest that our science teams are interested in the contents of a nearby dark nebula. Its atypical density suggests that there may be complex phenomena that might prove interesting."

The captain waved off the commentary as he sat in his chair and asked the nearest yeoman for coffee. This was another uncharacteristic behavior, though Spock had no time to ruminate before the captain spoke again. "How long til that nebula, Mister Spock?"

Spock walked to his science station and brought the report onscreen, though the action was unnecessary. He knew the charts from memory and could readily provide the numbers, but starting the shift so early with numbers did not stir eagerness in the humans as it did himself. "It will take us two days to reach the nebula at the current pace, Captain."

"Are there any nearby planets that would be suitable for shore leave?" the captain asked, turning his chair until he gained line of sight without turning his head beyond eighty-five degrees.

Spock nodded. "Yes, Captain, there is a nearby stellar system that has three planets within its parent star's habitable zone. One is inhabited and on agreeable terms with the Federation, the second is a preserve, and the third has been terraformed and colonized as a resort planet."

"Sounds perfect," the captain said triumphantly as he returned his chair to its home position. "Alright, send the coordinates to Sulu and let's get our girl out there."

"Yes, Captain." Spock did as he was ordered and sat down at his seat at the science station. There was very little active work when they were between missions, and it had been quite some time since he had an active astrophysics project to keep his idle mind busy, which left him with a high probability of becoming bored. However, since his social conversation with the captain, Spock *did* have a project idea. It was not considered work, but neither were his astrophysics projects. Spock calculated the probability of being caught—minor—and further calculated the likelihood of the captain being upset with him—insignificant—and decided to continue with his plan: a romantic gesture to celebrate his pairing with Leonard for one standard year.

★✚★✚★

There was little about the job that Leonard hated more than inventorying. In the olden days, when they had to scan and count by hand, the task would have appealed to his appreciation of repetitive tasks. However, with the latest technology, all Leonard had to do was pull out a tray and press a button, and the computers did everything else. No counting, no verifying numbers, no thinking at all. It was repetitive, sure, but only physically. Leonard wondered why humans relied so much on technology when they had perfectly good ways of manually counting, but he didn't wonder enough to change course. This did, however, give him the freedom to put his brain to good use: planning an anniversary celebration.

Leonard's conversation with Jim that morning left him with a pretty good general idea, but narrowing that down to a specific idea would be more difficult. Spock wasn't human, and if

Leonard learned anything this past year, it was that dating Spock was not like dating humans. Spock's idea of a romantic date was reading, discussing, and debating newly released papers over dinner. Leonard liked it, too, but only because it was with Spock. It was probably because they'd done it so often pre-dating that it was almost a ritual, one he'd missed in their early days of dating when Spock tried to act more human. Leonard grimaced. *That was a weird time.*

Knowing that Leonard's love thought he had to literally change himself to keep Leonard's favor made him even more determined to give him the anniversary date Spock deserved. And what better way to celebrate than to spend a day in the lab together? Yes, even Leonard was starting to get excited at the thought. Sure, it wasn't exactly romantic in the typical human sense, but it was romantic for them. Now all Leonard had to do was find a project that would keep them both interested and, more importantly, on the same page.

Leonard racked his brain for anything in his to-be-researched pile that could be short and sweet, but all of them were multi-day ventures or something Spock would disagree with. No, this had to be something they could do in a day and bond over. Another tray, another thought squashed. Two more trays, three more ideas out the airlock. By the eighth tray, Leonard was starting to lose hope, but that also happened to be the time when the Arxiv roundup sent out notices of popular new articles. And that little ding reminded him of something they'd had fun with on one of their dates.

Seven months ago, a popular(ly bad) article on the Arxiv proposed a new, 'more efficient' method for radiation burn treatment. However, there was nothing efficient about the new process. The equipment was difficult to obtain and even harder to maintain, and only the largest facilities could replicate it. Sure, it cut down on healing time and lifelong impact, but it wasn't practical. It could only fit on the largest of starships, which meant it couldn't be shipped out on a medical schooner to distant planets in need. Leonard and Spock talked at length about how awful this proposal was and even more about what an ass the primary investigator was. However, after ranting for a day, they faced a typical Enterprise emergency and never circled back.

This, however, was the perfect opportunity to circle back. They'd come up with hypotheticals during their date, but now they could turn those hypotheticals into real science. Sure, a day might be pushing it, but they could at least put in some substantive work before a nice dinner in their quarters—

Leonard paused.

Technically, Leonard and Spock still had separate quarters with an adjoining bathroom. Perhaps that was something he should bring up during their anniversary date? Leonard's lips pursed in thought, causing Christine to comment.

"What's with the grumpy face?" Christine teased. "Actually, all your expressions this morning have been interesting."

"Oh, nothin'," Leonard started as he continued to dwell.

Christine smirked and bumped Leonard with her hip as she passed by. "Nothing, huh?"

"Tomorrow is my anniversary with Spock and I'm thinkin' about asking if we could move in together." Leonard pushed the tray he was working on back into its slot and stared at the successful green readout. "You don't think it's too soon, do you?"

"I think the more important question is where you two will be living in six months."

Leonard froze.

"You forgot about that, didn't you?" Christine chuckled and patted him on the shoulder. "From what I've heard from Ny, Vulcans move faster than humans, so I don't think you have anything to worry about."

"Oh my god, are we moving too slow??!" Leonard cursed and pulled out the next tray. "Dammit all, I was trying to be respectful! Why don't Vulcans tell us anything about Vulcan culture?!"

Christine's chuckles turned into a laugh, and she leaned against the nearest desk to catch her breath. "Ahh, I haven't laughed that much at work in a long time."

"You referring to that time Jim stuck his finger in a hole we all told him not to and got stuck?"

"Of course! It's a shame he didn't let us keep the pieces of wall to frame for sickbay," Christine sighed. "Anyway, Spock's a smart man. He knows you're a catch and won't let you go for petty reasons like moving too fast or too slow. You two have a conversation about your needs and you'll find a compromise that works for both of you."

Leonard sighed and joined Christine by the desk, sitting on top of it and crossing his arms. "Thanks, Christine. I needed that check."

"So what are you planning for your anniversary?" Christine asked as she dropped an arm around Leonard's shoulders, clearly getting ready to conspire with him.

"You know that bullshit article a few months back that devised a new method for radiation burn treatment but was impractical as all get out?"

"Yes, you had to stop me from sending hate mail."

"Well, Spock and I aren't your typical couple, and I think the perfect anniversary for Spock would be working in the lab all day and developing an actually functional new method." Leonard grinned proudly and puffed up his chest. "I'll woo him with science!"

"He's already wooed," Christine teased. "But as long as you'd find that a satisfactory—the way you use the word, not Spock—date, then I think it'll be lovely."

Leonard cocked his head to the side and looked Christine up and down. "What're you gettin' at?"

"I know of your collection, Len." Christine smirked, and Leonard blushed. "Is a first anniversary in a lab truly enough for a classic romantic like you?"

"It's fine, it'll be fine. It might not be romantic to me, but it'll be romantic for Spock and that's all that matters!" Leonard stood up abruptly and marched back to the medicine cabinet. "Anyway, we should get back to inventorying, but if you want to help me get organized on our break, I'd appreciate it."

"I'd love to, Len!" Christine smiled, beautiful and bright, and gave Leonard another hug. "But I think you should talk with Spock about this and other things."

"Yeah, yeah, that's what Jim said." Leonard took out the next tray and smirked. "But it can't be a romantic surprise if I tell him about it!"

★✚★✚★

Spock's morning was spent reporting the occasional number, answering questions about the nebula, and planning his grand romantic gesture. He had already privately reserved the smaller portion of the observation deck and sent Lieutenant Sulu a message regarding a private tour of the arboretum. The latter inquired about the reasons, and Spock knew he would have to let

some in on his secret. Sulu was trustworthy and the only member of the alpha bridge crew—his closest companions—in a relationship that Spock wished to see himself and Leonard mirror in the near future. Nyota also had a high probability of supplying physical support to his ideas. Setting up, decorating the dinner area, and providing him with music recommendations.

The positive replies also came with suggestions. Spock evaluated Lieutenant Sulu's suggestion that they pick vegetables and herbs from the gardens for their dinner, which they would then cook together, and deemed it satisfactory. He then mentally explored Nyota's suggestion of playing the lute for Leonard to acceptable results. However, Spock ignored her comment about making the date for *both* of them as it was irrelevant. Spock enjoyed time with Leonard regardless of their activities, and he didn't need an anniversary celebration to mark the passage of a successful year. The measurements of time regarding relationships were arbitrary, but Spock knew it meant a great deal to Leonard, and he would honor that by constructing a date perfect for Leonard.

Having a general plan formed, Spock began reserving the facilities and supplies necessary to put it on. He asked to use the captain's entertaining space, primarily the kitchen, which was granted. He finalized the timing with Sulu for the gardens, informed Sulu of the fruits, vegetables, and herbs they would pick, and reserved harvesting equipment. The only portion of the evening Spock was unsure of was the music. While the Vulcan lyre was superior to Leonard's "fiddle" regarding the music Spock preferred, it was not suitable for the music Leonard favored. However, Leonard's human ears could not decipher the difference, no matter how aesthetically pleasing they were.

The final necessity for the evening was alcohol, and it was the most suitable time for Spock to reveal one of the gifts willed to him by his counterpart: the mint julep recipe that Leonard's counterpart had left to Ambassador Spock. While the ambassador did not reveal the nature of their relationship, it became readily apparent in hindsight when Leonard and Spock started dating. The fondness with which his counterpart interacted with Leonard, the surprise when he joined them on a mission without Leonard, the sadness when he said his farewells, which finished with Leonard, and the general freedom Ambassador Spock felt to express those feelings. Spock was still coming to terms with the expression of his feelings, and the death of Ambassador Spock had a mixed impact on his progress, but he was clear in one regard: Leonard would never have to question his feelings for him.

After sending the recipe to Commander Scott and requesting all the necessary ingredients, Spock moved on to ensure that Leonard's schedule was free. While it may be an abuse of power, it was also Spock's duty to see that lower-ranking officers were given adequate opportunities to show and improve their skills. Putting Leonard on leave would ensure that other medical crew could get experience in the tasks he and M'Benga typically oversaw together. M'Benga would also be provided with the opportunity to regain his familiarity with training others, which he'd lost during the incident they experienced under then Captain Pike's leadership during their previous posting. Yes, Spock altering Leonard's work schedule was a logical choice that benefitted multiple people. However, when Spock opened up the scheduler, he found that he and Leonard were both given the next day off. Initiated and approved by the captain.

Even more curious, they had three days of leave scheduled to start the day after they arrived at the nebula, which was also initiated by the captain. Spock lifted his eyebrow and

turned his seat toward the captain. "Captain, I see that you have given myself and Doctor McCoy leave—"

The captain turned his chair and winked. "Consider it an anniversary present."

"That does not explain the extended leave—"

"Spock," the captain said in a tone that Spock would describe as exasperated. "First of all, and I speak for everyone on the bridge right now, you and Bones deserve a much nicer anniversary getaway than a single day together on the ship." This statement was met with words of confirmation from Nyota and Lieutenant Sulu, a 'thumbs up' gesture from Lieutenant Chekov, and a smile from Yeoman Rand. "Second, I gave *all* your senior science staff leave for the first three days after arriving at the nebula. You all need a break; let your junior staff do the data collection without supervision and help them with the data processing and analysis after."

The captain used the same logic I had for Leonard, Spock thought to himself and nodded in return. It was an acceptable answer, though the captain should have discussed the scheduling changes and left the decision to Spock. He would discuss it later—

"You know you're both stubborn about taking time off," Nyota teased quietly from her nearby station. "Let your friends do this for you."

Spock sighed internally and acquiesced. "Thank you, Nyota."

★✚★✚★

Breakfast was quiet and intimate that morning. Leonard was briefly worried that they'd have clashing date plans when Spock greeted him with coffee, kisses, and a sweet 'Happy anniversary, ashaya,' but that worry was quickly quelled. They both acknowledged the date—Leonard was giddy that Spock remembered—and Spock didn't indicate that he had planned anything for him. Surprises were never up Spock's alley, and Leonard didn't do them often enough for Spock to be suspicious of him, so this was working out perfectly. The only downside was that Leonard had to leave him to finish setting up the lab, and Leonard struggled to get himself out the door. If it wasn't for Spock also having things to do that morning, he wasn't sure if he'd have been able to pry himself away.

Leonard, with Christine's help, set up the lab the night before, but there were still minor tweaks and additions Leonard had to do to make it perfect. Spock would likely request more equipment and materials once he knew the details, but that was part of the fun for Leonard. Seeing how his beau ticked when working together always fascinated him, even when it irritated him. Spock was so meticulous in his ways, but those differed depending on the experiment, and they hadn't yet had the time to experiment enough to experience all the types out there. Leonard would be willing to bet that even if they did, Spock would still find ways that they were different, and he smiled at the thought.

Christine dropped off the final batch of sample supplies and materials as Leonard organized the table to Spock-level detail. She laughed at him and slapped him hard on the back. "This is your boyfriend, Len, not the professor you're trying to impress so you can join his research team."

"If by 'professor' you mean Spock and by 'research team' you mean 'another year together,' then yes, yes he is." Leonard *did* stop toying with the flasks and stepped away from the table, though. "What time is it?"

"Late enough that Spock will start looking for you to make sure you eat lunch."

Leonard looked at the nearest chrono and cursed. "Dammit, this took way too long!"

"Because you made it take so long," Christine chided. "Go have fun with your boyfriend! Trust me, your weird lab date looks perfect for Spock. I'm not sure how perfect it is for *you*, though."

"Yeah, so you all say," Leonard groused. "This is something we both talked about doing and it'll be fun to do together on our anniversary."

Christine laughed softly and walked up to Leonard to kiss him on the cheek. "Good luck wooing your Vulcan, Doctor."

"Thanks, Christine." Leonard sighed and reached for his communicator. "Welp, time to get this show on the road!"

★✚★✚★

For once, Spock was grateful that his partner enjoyed sleeping in on his days off. This allowed Spock to finalize last-minute details, replicate and procure decorations, and meditate. When it was two minutes before Leonard's alarm, Spock woke him up in his preferred fashion: gentle kisses along the nape and a lower back massage. One of the many illogical practices of his partner was to sleep on his stomach despite the pressure it put on his lower back. Spock eventually convinced him to rest on his back, but Leonard would ultimately roll over during the night no matter how Spock held him. It was, as the humans say, adorable despite the harm it caused.

After the massage, Spock fetched coffee for Leonard and officially woke him with a "Happy anniversary, ashaya." Breakfast was their traditional spread, though Spock could not enjoy it while he harbored a secret. Leonard enjoyed grand romantic gestures, but Spock preferred clarity and openness. Keeping the anniversary date a surprise was a far greater burden than Spock had anticipated, especially when Leonard did not indicate he had any plans for the day.

That was until Leonard left for the labs. In his uniform.

Spock was perplexed. While Leonard occasionally worked on projects on his days off, it was usually *with* Spock and not in uniform. Seeing his partner briefly wave from the hallway door before disappearing behind it left a metaphorical hole in his stomach. If Leonard was busy and had plans, Spock's date would interrupt them, and Leonard would not be pleased. Then Spock wondered why such a sentimental human would choose their anniversary—a marker of time they both recognized—to work on a side project without his partner. The potential reasons for Leonard's decision were uncomfortable to contemplate, and Spock decided he would put even more effort into making this date a success.

Nyota and Sulu met Spock in the arboretum as they walked through the path Spock intended to take Leonard on. It was lovely and filled with a variety of Earth, Vulcan, and alien plans working together to create an ecosystem unlike any other, much like he and Leonard. The metaphor was romantic, and Spock would highlight it on their trip. Another highlight would be the vegetable and herb gardens at the end of their tour through the arboretum. Sulu pointed out each of the ripe ingredients and showed him how to harvest them. This preparation was necessary for an uninterrupted date, which was Spock's goal. Any interruptions would lead to a delay, which could metaphorically topple his entire plan, inevitably upset his partner, and ruin the anniversary.

"I love the date, Spock, and I think McCoy will, too," Nyota started.

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "As Leonard would say, I sense a 'but' coming."

Nyota sighed and leaned against the wall of Sulu's botany lab. "*But*, where are you in this?"

"Aside from the meticulously timed and practiced schedule," Sulu said with a tone that indicated teasing.

"What greater form of love is there than sacrifice?"

Nyota and Sulu rolled their eyes in tandem.

Knowing that he would not get any further convincing them that this date was perfect, Spock bid them farewell and left to go to the arboretum entrance. It was time to send the first message and invite Leonard to their date.

★✚★✚★

McCoy >> Spock @ 1129: Hey, darling, I got something to show you in our lab. I think you'll like it!

Spock >> McCoy @ 1130: Good morning, Ashaya. I trust that your morning activities have been pleasant. I request that you join me in the arboretum promptly.

Spock >> McCoy @ 1132: Is what you intend to show me in the lab time-sensitive? My event is time-sensitive.

McCoy >> Spock @ 1133: Can the arboretum wait? I need you in the lab.

McCoy >> Spock @ 1135: Sorry we keep talking over each other, you go ahead.

Spock >> McCoy @ 1135.25: Apologies, ashaya, you go first.

McCoy >> Spock @ 1140: Please meet me in the lab, Spock. I promise it'll be worth your while!

Spock >> McCoy @ 1145: If you insist.

★✚★✚★

"Hey Len?" Christine asked after Leonard put down his comm with a stupid smile.

Leonard blushed as he remembered Christine was still in the room. "What?"

"Are you going to wear your uniform to a date?"

"*Sheeeit*!"

★✚★✚★

"Spock!" Nyota shouted as she ran up to Spock. "Please don't tell me you invited him already."

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "I did, though he requested I meet him in the lab, and I agreed."

"Don't forget to change!"

Spock looked down at his clothes. His *uniform*. He would have scowled if he were a human with the same inclinations as Leonard.

★✚★✚★

McCoy >> Spock @ 1149: Meet at 1230?

Spock >> McCoy @ 1149.4: I request a slight delay in order to change clothes.

Spock >> McCoy @ 1151: 1230 is satisfactory.

McCoy >> Spock @ 1152: See you there, darlin'!

★✚★✚★

After a mad dash, with help from Christine and M'Benga, Leonard found and changed into a decently fitting pair of slacks and a dress shirt. He waited eagerly for Spock to come to the lab, rocking up onto the balls of his feet and back down as he stared at the door and practiced his greeting. After two seconds, Leonard thought again. He put on a crisp white lab coat, grabbed another for Spock, and slicked back his hair like his momma taught him during his cotillion days. Though Leonard could never get his cowlick to cooperate like his momma could. While it wasn't how he'd typically dress on a date, it was perfect for their date, and that's what mattered. It wasn't comfortable, but it looked good. *Proper*. Spock would take one look at him and lose his composure, guaranteed.

And Leonard was right, just not the way he was expecting.

Spock came into the lab looking adorable in his hand-knit sweater, one of the special ones his mom made him. Leonard didn't know what the Vulcan collared shirt equivalent was called, but Spock wore it underneath the sweater, and he looked so damn good. So damn good that Leonard forgot how to speak, and his well-practiced greeting turned into gobbledegook that not even the translator could pick up.

"Leonard?" Spock asked, posture tensing and brows furrowing.

Leonard held his arms stiffly to his side and hid a pinch to his thigh. "I, ah, sorry. You look real nice, Spock."

Spock relaxed with a half-sigh and extended his first two fingers for a Vulcan kiss. "I thank you, Leonard. Now, what is it that you wish to show me? I would like us to get to the arboretum within the hour."

"Uh, I suppose we can take a break? Yeah, we'll probably be ready to take a break by then." Leonard nodded confidently, gestured to the lab table, and followed Spock. "Remember that article about radiation burn treatments?"

"I do, indeed. It was one of our longest dates." Spock smiled ever so slightly and moved his fingers over the various equipment laid out. "I presume that you wish to improve on their methods?"

"*We* are gonna *perfect* them!" Leonard grinned and took the extra lab coat from the table, offering it to Spock. "Let's getcha out of that handsome sweater of yours and get you into a lab coat."

Leonard and Spock worked together smoothly, like hot butter over toast, and devised an initial plan based on their earlier debates in less than twenty minutes. They would first attempt to replicate the other doctors' process, *if* it was even possible, and then make it a million times better. If they couldn't replicate their process, Leonard and Spock would jump back to the idea board and start from scratch. Improving the method would be faster, but they both knew they'd likely need to develop an entirely different method. The process was *that* bad, which made Leonard frustrated all over again.

Still, by the end of one hour, Leonard and Spock managed to reach a good stopping point. Modifying their equipment to replicate the other paper's results was doable but required Scotty, who would only be a third wheel on their date. Leonard used the excuse, 'Let's outperform those jerks so much that they're only included in the background section of our paper!' and Spock accepted it without fuss. In fact, Spock didn't fuss at *all* and barely let Leonard finish before he started exchanging his lab coat for his sweater. *Strange*, Leonard thought. However, he wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth, and he happily ditched his lab coat to follow Spock to the arboretum.

Spock was not necessarily displeased by what he saw in the lab, though his curiosity was piqued. Leonard mentioned nothing about their anniversary and got to work promptly when Spock reminded him of the conflicting plans. *Does Leonard truly intend to work during their anniversary when they have the day off?* It was perplexing, but Spock could not resist the temptation of a scientific endeavor that benefitted the well-being of many...while also potentially humiliating the so-called scientists who considered a barely improved method to be groundbreaking and award-worthy. Spock did not want to admit the latter motivation, even when Leonard muttered it to himself while writing their plans on the board.

An hour passed, and Spock was again reminded that they worked efficiently together when they agreed. And Leonard looked, as the humans say, *cute* when he busied himself with lab equipment and theory. Spock would say that this was an adequate and enjoyable date if it had not been at the expense of the date he had planned—and out of character for a 'romantic' like Leonard. However, they had to return to the arboretum and harvest the ingredients they would use for dinner. Leonard would get a shortened version of the planned tour, but Spock did not want to rush the harvesting as Leonard often complained about not having access to 'homegrown' fruits and vegetables.

When they got to the arboretum entrance, Spock began the tour, pointing out everything that Lieutenant Sulu said would be of interest. The pace was swift, but that speed came with efficiency. They reached the end of the tour and approached the vegetable and herb gardens at the time Spock originally planned for, and Spock began instructing Leonard how to harvest them. That was, apparently, not the correct method of getting Leonard's involvement.

"You do know that we grow our own food back home, right?" Leonard scoffed as he rolled up his sleeves and crouched to the ground. "I know how to harvest a damn carrot."

"Apologies, I was not implying that you did not know—"

"It's fine," Leonard grumbled. "I just don't know why you have me out here pulling carrots when we could be in the lab."

Spock forgot to inform Leonard of his intentions, which is the reason for Leonard's displeasure. "I wanted us to make dinner together from ingredients that we harvested ourselves, as you have often shared your desire for doing so when we return to Earth after our mission."

Leonard's expression faltered, though Spock did not quite know how to read it. "That sounds lovely, Spock." He paused and pulled two more carrots from the ground. "I'm sorry for being crabby on our anniversary."

"I apologize for not informing you of my intentions."

"Well, while we're being' forthright," Leonard began as the left corner of his lips curved upward. That was all the warning Spock was given before Leonard grabbed his hand and pulled him to the ground. Had Spock's footing not been sound, he would have fallen. "You better not be making me do all this hard labor for our dinner tonight!"

"Of course not," Spock assured with a faint smile. "The goal was to perform this task together."

"Well let's do that and then we can drop our bounty off in our quarters and then we can get back to the lab." Leonard attempted to assist Spock with rolling up his sleeves despite his dirtied hands, and Spock pulled away. "Oh, right, the sweater. Why'd you wear nice clothes when we were going to get dirty in the garden? Highly illogical," Leonard chided.

"That..."

"Didn't think of that, eh?"

Spock looked down, somewhat ashamed. "My mother was the gardener; I merely held the basket."

Leonard again chuckled and clapped off the dirt from his hands, pressing one palm to Spock's cheek. "Then go get the basket, darlin', and I'll pick us a fine feast."

★✚★✚★

The next morning, Leonard and Spock sat sheepishly before a barely contained Jim. The damn fool's lips kept twitching because he wanted to laugh but was too nice to actually let one slip. Leonard knew that he knew exactly what happened on their anniversary, but Jim was sure as hell going to ask anyway—

"So how was the anniversary date?" Jim asked, his smile finally breaking across his face.

Leonard scowled. "Which one?"

Spock stared intently at his breakfast and did not comment.

"Whichever one started first, let's hear it." Jim's grin faded to a more endearing smile. "Can't be all that bad if you two are still in one piece and together, though you did try to set my ship on fire in two places."

Leonard groaned and slapped his hands across his face. "Don't remind me!"

"Consider this payment for the damage," Jim teased."

Spock huffed and said, "Neither of us informed the other of our date plans." Leonard knew it wouldn't satisfy Jim, but a man could hope.

Jim leaned forward, elbows on the table and arms folding no-nonsense like. "How did two of my highest ranking officers manage to set two fires in one day?"

"Well it started out fine," Leonard mumbled. "We had an hour in the lab, then an hour in the arboretum."

"The switching of dates was passable until we began running experiments while simultaneously cooking," Spock added.

Leonard rubbed his forehead and leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "We tried running back and forth to keep up both, but then we'd lose track of time...." Spock reached over and pressed his fingers into Leonard's temples, releasing some pressure. "Thanks, Spock."

"We needed to replicate a variety of radiation burns on synthetic flesh, and the process takes between twenty and forty-eight minutes. We set the shorter experiments at the beginning of our lab time and reserved the longer exposures for when we were about to leave."

"And that was all fine and dandy until we started a debate on knife techniques when cutting the damn onions!"

Spock removed his hand and sat up straighter, clearly not pleased by the subtle accusation.

"The methods I suggested were shown to be—"

"I'll cut onions however I damn please!" Leonard snapped.

"Boys," Jim chided. "Focus."

"Anywho, we were ten minutes late getting everything into the pot and the tofurky in the oven, and then we heard the alarms." Leonard rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "We got to the lab, and our samples were up in flames, with a good

chunk of the enclosure being radiated to death. Smoke everywhere, but nothing radioactive breached the secondary enclosure."

"Well that's good to know," Jim said sarcastically. "And let me guess: You two got distracted with that fire and over-roasted a fake bird?"

"Charred."

"I cannot name a federation species who would find it edible."

"Ruined the oven, too."

"I'm aware. It was my oven." Oh, *oh*, Jim was not pleased, despite the smile that wanted to break out. "Did you two at least learn your lesson?"

Leonard looked at Spock, Spock looked at Leonard, and then they both looked at Jim.

Jim smiled at them, sweet as pie, but the vein in his forehead gave him away. "*Talk. To. Each. Other.*"

"Uh, right," Leonard said oh so eloquently.

Spock nodded with a more formal "Affirmative."

"Great! Now, as your mutual best friend with the help of our other friends, I bequeath unto thee, an *actual* anniversary date!" Jim made fake trumpet noises that got way too much attention as he slid a PADD with a brochure across the table. "Three days at the resort planet. Couples mani-pedis, massages, meditation and yoga rooms, and more. All you have to do is submit a review and, if positive, they'd like to use you in their advertising. They're trying to get more Federation visitors and the Federation is trying to get them to join."

Leonard blushed, more out of embarrassment than shyness, and solemnly nodded. "Yessir, we hear you loud and clear."

"*If you set one more fire, so help me—*"

"We assure you that there will be no more fires due to our negligence." Spock put his hand over Leonard's, which was on the PADD. "Thank you, Jim. We appreciate the thoughtfulness of our friends."

"Good, because I'm sending you both on a shuttle right now before Scotty finds out what he has to fix today and why."

The two barely managed to escape before Scotty found them, and their engineering friend had to settle for a scathing message instead. Leonard laughed as Spock piloted the shuttle away, and they could see Scotty running into the shuttle bay. While Spock may not have found it humorous, he did appreciate the timing and was certain that Jim played a role in it. Regardless, they were on their way to an anniversary date that took both of their needs and desires into consideration. They would be inspecting a potential shore leave destination and Federation hopeful while relaxing and enjoying each other's company; it was truly the ideal scenario.

After checking in and arriving at their room, Spock and Leonard exchanged their uniforms for robes and settled on the large, central cushion that appeared to be the equivalent of a sofa. Leonard immediately fell sideways and rested on Spock's lap, crossing his right ankle over his left knee as he held a PADD aloft. His partner always found such fascinating ways to 'lay about' despite how uncomfortable it looked from an observer's standpoint. *Endearing.*

"Mm, so what activity do you want to do first?" Leonard asked as he perused the PADD.

Spock pressed his first two fingers to Leonard's forehead before running his fingers

through Leonard's hair. "I suggest that we each take a day and plan it for the other."

Leonard's laugh was warm and vibrant, originating deep in his chest. "To clarify, we each take *separate* days, right?"

"Indeed."

"Well, we're here for two half-days and two full days. What should we do with the halfs?" While Leonard's tone did not indicate he had already formulated a plan, the subtle smirk and eyebrow lift did.

Spock returned the eyebrow. "I will defer to you for today, if you defer to me on the day of our return."

Leonard grinned broadly and sat up quickly, which caused the PADD to topple to the floor. Before Spock had a chance to counter, he found himself straddled by an eager doctor leaning in close. Spock felt hot breath on his ear, a spot Leonard knew was sensitive to his ministrations. His partner did, indeed, have a plan.

"Wouldn't mind if you took me to bed and we made up for our lost eve— Woah!"

Leonard's limbs flailed momentarily as Spock lifted him from the seating cushion but ultimately wound around Spock. Spock supported Leonard's posterior, though it was much higher than originally planned. Spock's nose was to Leonard's chest, and he could not see properly. However, Spock had already inspected the room and had a mental map of everything, including Leonard's discarded duffle bag in the middle of the bedroom. So, without delaying his partner's desired activity, Spock started walking.

"H-hey! Not so high! What are you doing? You don't usually carry me like this?" Leonard's legs wrapped tightly around Spock's chest, and his arms wound tighter around Spock's shoulders. "Watch out— How did— How in the hell are you walking so well?!"

Spock was momentarily pleased with his partner's praise and was a second away from boasting as they crossed the threshold into the bedroom. However, Leonard's head was six point three centimeters taller than typical, and the average height of the species of this planet was shorter than that of humans and Vulcans. This unfortunate pairing of circumstances led to Spock inadvertently walking Leonard's head into the top of the doorway with a resounding *THUNK!* Spock froze. Leonard froze. It was not Spock's intention—

Leonard's chest started quivering. Slow, staccato, with metered breaths.

"Ashaya, are you hurt?"

Leonard's voice cracked as he slipped down Spock's body, but it was a crack of laughter. "Oh, hun," he started between bursts of giggles. "I just... I *just* got done praisin' ya and then, hah, you ram me right into the doorframe!" Leonard clutched his stomach with one hand and his head with the other as he turned away to continue his laughter. "You are never gonna live this down!"

Spock huffed and pressed his palms against Leonard's shoulders, pushing him the rest of the way inside. "I would rather this incident persist over the rumors of us causing two fires on the Enterprise in the same day."

"Unfortunately, I don't think there's anything more scandalous we could do to outshine that." Leonard rubbed the back of his head once more with a lopsided smile.

"I fear that your hypothesis is correct."

Leonard's smile turned to a smirk, though Spock did not see why his statement would lead to that. "C'mon, Spock, we both know I'm *always* right!" *Ah.*

Spock's right eyebrow rose, as did the corner of his lip. "Would you like a chronological list that counters that statement?"

"Not if you want to kiss me."

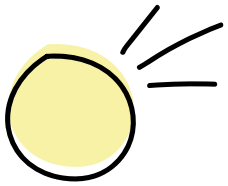
"An activity that is equally enjoyable," Spock teased as he closed the gap between them and kissed Leonard, both with his lips and hands. "Happy anniversary, Leonard."

Leonard smiled softly and rocked on the balls of his feet, another endearing habit, before rocking into another kiss. "Happy anniversary, Spock."

★✚★✚★

the meeting place

by USS Queertastic



the place in between
a breath into the shadows
where life and death blur

it is here we meet
mind to mind becoming one
understand me now

like petals reach out
to touch rays of morning light
that promise new life

we share this known truth
that in the darkest of nights
there always comes dawn.

I bid you adieu

by tigereyes45

warning: Major Character Death

Leonard McCoy sits, staring down at the test results.

He's no longer breathing.

Irritated, tired eyes take in the worst possible outcome. It ages them instantly. His thumb presses into the screen. If he had Vulcan strength, the PADD would crack beneath him. With all of his human effort, he can't even force the screen to flicker.

Spock has moved from lying down to a more comfortable position on the biobed. At least, that's what Leonard assumes from the sound of clothes shifting against the smooth bed. With readings like these, Spock shouldn't even be able to sit up. McCoy bites the right corner of his bottom lip. It's painful enough to focus his mind, but not obvious enough for Spock to notice from the angle he's at. If he does, well, Leonard hopes the Vulcan would consider it rude to inquire about it. Shit. How has he been managing to walk around?

For years, McCoy has praised Vulcan physiology. Sure, he's taken a few softball cracks at it, too, but it's saved Spock's life more times than the doctor would care to count.

And now it's killing him.

"Is the examination done, Doctor?"

His mouth's as dry as the Sahara desert air. He would be less likely to choke if someone had shoved a fistful of sand down his throat. Leonard gulps. That would've been preferable. "Yes." McCoy tries to force himself to look Spock in the eye. His body feels tight, like a freshly wound-up spring. All he can manage is a side glance, and it hurts to even keep that up.

Spock's legs dangle over the edge as he stretches out towards the counter where his science blue shirt sits. Now that Leonard's paying closer attention, he can just make out the way Spock's arm shakes. It's barely noticeable. If McCoy didn't have the results of the check-up, he'd have never known. Not until it was truly too late.

"Spock." McCoy chokes up on the 'ak' sound. It comes out butchered and sounds more like 'chk.' If it bothers the Vulcan, he says nothing. He's been rather silent. Oddly quiet, in fact.

Leonard glares back down at the PADD. How could he have ever considered this to be 'minor pain'? Barely noticeable, his ass.

"Yes, Doctor?"

Leonard drops the PADD. There's a loud *clank* as he abruptly stands up. Wringing his hands together, in much the same way Jim so often does while in sickbay, McCoy mulls over how best to break the bad news. If this was Scotty, he'd preface and end it with a drink. With anyone else, he'd rip the bandage off quickly and offer them a shoulder, his ears, anything they'd need. McCoy lifts his gaze and forces himself to look Spock in the eyes.

"I'm sorry."

Spock shakes his head slightly. "You performed all of your duties, Doctor." He rests his hands in his lap. "Apologies will not change that."

"You don't get it do you?" Spock raises an eyebrow. McCoy pulls back as if a snake has just reared its head with fangs bare. Exhausted eyes shift down, staring at the ground. With great effort, he swallows the lump in his throat. There's still one duty he has left. In a steadfast, hollow voice, McCoy elaborates. "You're dying, Spock."

"I am aware."

Leonard's blood runs cold.

How? Of course, he's aware. Far be it for a Vulcan to tell his primary physician that something was wrong with him before it's too late! Leonard balls his hands up into fists. How long had he been planning on hiding this? He digs his nails into his palms. No. McCoy unclenches his fists and nervously licks his dry lips. Spock could have hidden this forever if he wanted. This was Spock's way of letting him know. The thought chills him to his core. All the pent-up anger and worried frustration are gone.

Leonard struggles to inhale enough air to speak.

"You're dying and I may not be able to save you." His voice shakes. It's the kind of admission he never wanted to give.

"Doctor, it is illogical to believe you can cure everything. The common cold seems to remain rather prevalent throughout your species despite your many counters to it." Leonard ignores the insult for what it really is. A thinly veiled attempt to comfort him. To assuage the guilt Spock must know he's feeling.

He would be right. Leonard feels guilty! For not having noticed any signs of illness sooner, for not realizing that Spock had been in pain for who knows how long, for not even picking up on the slight ways he'd been kinder than usual. Hell, that should've been the first clue. Here, Leonard thought he was finally warming up to the idea of public affection. The slight smiles that dressed his face more often, the way he seemed to close the space between them in the hallways without a care about what the other officers may assume, side pressed to warm side, arms crossing but never tumbling around the other.

It wasn't the Vulcan warming up to human displays of public affection, but him seeking comfort. Final moments lead to bizarre final acts and all that.

All of his hope is crushed.

McCoy walks away, head hanging.

"But," the doctor lifts his head and looks back at Spock from over his shoulder, "if anyone could find a cure it would be you, Doctor McCoy."

Despite all the despair, McCoy still manages to eke out a smile. "That almost sounds like a compliment."

Spock stands and takes two long strides closer to McCoy. The doctor takes note of a slight wobbling in the Vulcan's right leg. Spock folds his hands behind his back. When he stands straight like that, McCoy is forced to look up at him. Though he doesn't much mind the effort now. "The Captain would call it a vote of confidence."

Right, it's not all rain clouds and hurricanes.

McCoy wags his finger as he turns away. "I'll try to get you right as rain, Mr. Spock."

When he's almost back to his desk, a hand catches him by his elbow. McCoy's body contracts and tenses up at the sudden touch. Leonard looks back, half expecting Spock to drop dead right there. Instead, that bloody Vulcan is smiling at him. It wasn't one of his faint, barely there ghosts of a smile. Or even one of his blink-and-you-miss-it grins.

No. It was a bona fide, soft, genuine smile. The kind of smile that heals an aching heart and cures the rainy day blues. "Thank you, Doctor McCoy."

Maybe he was the ghost, 'cause Spock would never let anyone see such an expression so openly and say such sweet words with actual warmth in his voice. Not even his kindly neighborhood doctor.

★✚★✚★

Under the bright office lights, McCoy finds himself sitting haphazardly in his chair, glaring down at the dozens of PADDs scattered across his desk. By his original estimates, he had about a month to solve this particular health matter. So he did everything. Ran test after test, downloaded every scrap of information he could find on Vulcan biology, and even looked at the rare occurrences of past half-Vulcan-half-human pregnancies that failed and what caused those failures. Anything that could offer just the tiniest bit of information that would lead him to the right answer. He's spent nights in the chemistry labs and days in sickbay. He hasn't seen his bed in two weeks and even had Spock go as far as reaching out to Vulcan doctors about the matter.

Anything to solve this.

Yet, as the days went by, attempt after attempt to identify Spock's exact problem failed. Their shots at curing it were M'Benga and himself cautiously giving Spock a variety of medications, recording the results, and trying their next best idea.

Two weeks. Two weeks he'd been doing his best, and it just wasn't good enough.

Now, the computers estimated that Spock has anywhere from a day to a mere hour.

Leonard raises his head and glances out his open office door towards the biobeds. Spock was resting in the first one; the only one McCoy has a clear line of sight on from his desk. He had even rearranged the desk around so its front faces the wall his back used to. All so he could glance up and see Spock. The Vulcan has started to suffer from spasming fits. They made about as much sense as the reason his body was shutting down. McCoy could do just about as much for them, too.

Which was squat.

He just stands there, watching Spock suffer, strapping him down so he can't hurt himself. He always thought wrestling with a Vulcan was difficult. After all, it did nearly kill Jim, but he had never imagined just how much Spock had been holding back on everyone before. During his first fit, he was on the bridge. His hand went straight through the science console. Clean through, metal and all.

That was yesterday, and the number of fits has only been increasing.

Leonard presses his back against his chair. His eyes stare into the dimly lit biobed room, trying to catch as much sight of Spock as possible. Right now, it was time for the night cycle. To help patients sleep but allow the doctors to keep an eye on them, all of sickbay's lights were reduced by fifty percent. No more, and no less. Though McCoy had the lights on at full power in his office.

Most of the time he'd at least keep the door closed out of courtesy to the patient in that first bed. Spock doesn't need such courtesy, though. He's not even sleeping.

As if reading Leonard's thoughts, Spock sits up in bed. McCoy doesn't bother tearing his eyes away. He doesn't even try and pretend to not be staring.

"Doctor—"

Sickbay's entrance slides open. Jim briskly steps through before the door is even finished opening. McCoy pushes himself out of his chair and follows behind Jim. He'd been visiting every two hours or so since Spock was dismissed from duty yesterday. Leonard doesn't even want to hypothesize how much Jim's been sleeping. The amount may be as dangerously low as his own.

Jim sidesteps through the doorway that leads to the biobeds, allowing McCoy to push through alongside him. On the other side, they part ways. They take their places on either side of Spock's bed.

Jim wraps his hands around his elbows, holding himself. "How are you feeling, Spock?"

That earns him an eyebrow raise. "Feeling, Jim?"

The Captain lets out a short laugh. His shoulders loosen a bit, but he doesn't let go of himself. He can't truly relax. McCoy knows that feeling very well.

"Spock," the doctor begins pulling his eyes from Jim and towards Spock. His hair looks greasy. He must've skipped out on using his sonic shower today. Hell, with how frequent the attacks have been becoming, that might've been the best choice.

Time's running out.

Jim cuts through the silence. "Can anything be done, Bones?" Jim must've sensed Bones' hesitation. Somehow he always does. Of course, he had to undercut the doctor's nerves with a question.

The exact question McCoy wishes he didn't have an answer for.

"No, Jim." McCoy has to look away. His eyes fall to the PADD he left beside Spock's bed for casual reading and sending messages. Has he been using it? If there was ever a time to decide what should happen next, it's now. "I'm sorry."

"Doctor," and he hates the way Jim says the title. It's filled with such a deep coldness it would make a winter day in the mountains feel warm. Jim's upset. Spock is dying. McCoy's failing to save the one person this ship needs almost as much as Jim himself. Damn it! What's the point of being out here if he can't keep these men alive? It's his job.

His only job.

Lost so deep in his own thoughts, McCoy doesn't hear Jim call out to him again. He doesn't notice the sudden regret passing through his face or hear the tender way he calls out McCoy's name.

It's only Spock that pulls him back out of his destructive self-pity. "Doctor McCoy."

McCoy's eyes go wide as reality smacks him yet again. Jim was looking at the pair of them curiously with a small sly smile. "Still using titles then?"

"This is a professional setting, Captain." Spock sounds as if he truly believes that.

McCoy bites down on his sarcastic scoff.

Kirk shakes his head. "Please Spock, none of that captain business now." Lips parted, body rigidly still, Jim all but whispers, "How much time is left, Bones?"

Licking his lips was becoming a nervous habit of Leonard's at this point. That cursed dryness hasn't left him since the preliminary tests were done. "High estimate would be a day."

"What is the low estimate, Doctor?" Of course, Spock would ask.

"About an hour."

"How can there be such a large difference?" Jim practically shouts, completely forgetting about the other two patients in the room.

"There's always room for error, sir." It's an underserved bitterness. Bones knows that. Not that it keeps him from feeling particularly venomous.

They're both losing him.

"Jim, may the doctor and I have a moment alone?"

Kirk sucks his lips in, clearly wanting to refuse to leave. His hazel eyes flicker from Spock to Bones. Leonard shrugs. Spock has every right to ask, just as Jim has every reason to refuse.

With a hesitating nod that gradually grows firmer, Jim concedes. "Alright, Spock. Doctor, if he starts to go, you will call me back in, won't you?"

"Of course, Jim, but I have high hopes that the first estimate I gave is the more accurate one." It's a lie, albeit one he, too, wants to believe in.

As Jim goes, Leonard's eyes follow him. As the door shuts, blue eyes remain glued to it. His body wholly rejects the sight before him. Refusing even to let him glance at Spock.

"Doctor?"

McCoy shuts his eyes. "Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable, Spock?" As the words start, he finds it impossible to stop. Anything to fill the silence and keep his gravest thoughts at bay. "Maybe I can bring something down from your room or light some incense."

"I doubt the other patients would appreciate that."

Right. He had forgotten about them.

"Doctor McCoy," Spock begins, and Leonard can feel a hand enveloping his own. "If you do not look at a patient, you will not be able to readily respond to any changes in condition."

What a way to ask someone to look at you. McCoy turns his head and forces his eyes open. Spock was watching him with a look of obvious interest. As their eyes meet, Spock's expression melts away. He once again dons an empty, expressionless look that McCoy has come to know means he's comfortable. Couldn't he ever just be straightforward?

Leonard pulls the stool he had set up next to Spock closer. The doctor takes a seat, never letting go of Spock's hand. Instead, the doctor wraps his other hand on top of Spock's. He raises the Vulcan's longer fingers to his lips. He stops just short so his breath will warm them without touching. Spock was never really comfortable with public affection, and while the other patients sleep soundly in their beds, he still won't cross that line.

It's a doctor's job to make their patients comfortable when they can't save them.

Inhaling deeply, McCoy squeezes Spock's hand. As he exhales, he forces his eyes to open fully. They rush over Spock, taking in all of him. He attempts to commit this moment to memory. The way Spock's hand feels trapped between his own. The odd way, they're so warm but feel so cold compared to his normal temperature. He memorizes the slightly mussed hair, with the front bangs still perfectly in place. Spock's lips, so thin McCoy assumes they are still as soft and warm

as they had been the last time they shared a human kiss.

"This is our first time saying goodbye, Spock." He can't bring himself to say it outright just yet. A bad habit he's picked up from his dear Vulcan.

Spock tilts his head. He looks up at McCoy as if he is doubting the doctor's memory. "That is not true, Doctor. If you recall, we said farewell when dealing with the Amoeba situation."

McCoy gives Spock's hand another squeeze. Every word ushered another bit of anger against those smooth knuckles. "I didn't say goodbye then, Spock, and you said good luck." He takes a little delight in feeling Spock shiver.

Spock rolls his eyes. "Semantics, Doctor."

This time, McCoy is the one to raise an eyebrow and smile. "Aren't you such a big fan of those?"

"Not at this moment." Spock pulls his hand free. McCoy lets it go, doing his best to allow his disappointment to read through the last vestiges of the touch.

Instead of Spock resting his hand on his chest or by his side, he raises it and cups McCoy's right cheek. "Thank you, Doctor."

It's the last straw. The last of Leonard's strength fails him, and he starts to crumple beneath Spock's touch. Folding in on himself. Long, nimble fingers catch his shoulders. Both of his shoulders. Through a blurry, tear-filled gaze, Leonard can make out a vague outline of Spock sitting up.

Instead of keeping the doctor at arm's length, McCoy feels Spock pulling him closer. His head taps against Spock's shoulder as firm hands move from McCoy's shoulders. One braces itself on his upper back, and the other fondly cradles his neck.

"I'm sorry, Spock."

Gentle shushing is the Vulcan's response. McCoy wonders how much time has passed. How much longer will Spock be around? He hasn't been keeping track of the minutes, but Spock undoubtedly has.

McCoy tries to pull away. "I can call your parents."

Spock's grip holds him still. "There is no need. I already spoke to them yesterday."

Of course, he's called Amanda and Sarek. Why hadn't McCoy assumed that? Right. That was why he'd given him the PADD after all. Get all his stuff set in order. "I'm surprised they aren't here then."

"They wanted to come. My father was rather insistent that they put their current duties on hold and attend to this matter." Spock sounds almost as surprised as McCoy feels. This matter? One thing McCoy has never envied Vulcans for is how often their insistence on avoiding emotional language leaves them sounding apathetic. Who calls their son dying a 'matter'? "However, work has them too far away to make it in time."

"Given the *Enterprise*'s status, it would be difficult for any ship to make it this far in the span of a day," McCoy mumbles into Spock's chest.

"Indeed, however, they will be here within the next two days."

"To retrieve your body." That's good. Then Spock won't be left behind on a random planet they happen to be passing or, in a tube until they can get back to Vulcan or Earth. That's a relief.

"And my soul."

This time, not even Spock's Vulcan strength could keep McCoy from raising his head and staring at Spock with disbelief. "Your soul?"

"When a Vulcan passes, their katra and body must be carried back to Vulcan, so it can be carried to Mount Seleya and join the Hall of Ancients." Realization dawns on McCoy. Is … is that what he wants done with his body? Damn it, they should have had this conversation sooner, but he had been so preoccupied with trying to fix the damn problem that— "However, I would like for my body to be buried on Earth."

Spock's words silence his thoughts.

"Earth?" He's left stunned with surprise. Hope fills his chest, but his breath catches in his throat. Uncertainty plagues his mind. "Why?"

"I hear Georgia is beautiful but I never visited it during my time on Earth."

McCoy's heart is in his ears. He buries his face in Spock's neck and wraps his arms so tight around the Vulcan that Spock could probably feel every heave of his labored breathing and shaking from silent sobs.

Spock lifts McCoy from the stool and moves him onto his lap. His head lies on top of Leonard's. "I have already contacted the funeral home, nearest to your family's home." The one where his father is buried? "I assumed it would not be presumptuous."

"It's not."

A hand rubs soothing circles into Leonard's back. "There's space for two plots on a hill, overlooking a valley with trees." Leaning closer to Leonard's ear, Spock notes. "You have always enjoyed being outdoors."

That earns him a crackly laugh from the doctor. "When the plants couldn't kill us."

"They will not be able to kill the dead."

"I …" It's unsettling. The sudden reminder. For a moment, McCoy had forgotten himself. "I know Spock." McCoy moves one of his hands up to cup Spock's face. "I know."

Spock holds his hand there. Carefully applying enough pressure to push his fingers a little more against his skin. "However, with my body to be buried on Earth, I will need someone to carry my katra to Mount Seleya."

"You need someone to carry your soul?"

"Yes." Spock nods, and all of his uncharacteristic amount of sharing suddenly makes sense. "Would you be willing, Doctor?"

Raising a brow, he asks, "What's the risk?"

"There is a chance you may develop side effects such as multiple personality disorder or a severe shock to your nervous system." Well, doesn't that sound just delightful? "However, it is not without potential benefits as well."

"Spock, I don't—" McCoy pulls away, but Spock keeps his hand pressed against the Vulcan's cheek, refusing to let the touch subside.

"Please, Doctor McCoy." As if the pleading wasn't heart wrenching enough, Spock continues, "There isn't much time left."

McCoy bites down his complaints and listens.

"You would have the benefit of my experiences," Spock continues, giving his best argument.

Now that sounds interesting. "All of your experiences?" Probably the best and worst kinds.

"It depends on how well the katra settles within your mind and body."

"So," McCoy gulps. "Would I hear you?"

"Perhaps." Spock gives a small nod. "Katra sharing is not a specific science. In fact there are many who doubt its existence since it is difficult to detect or study."

Not a specific science! "But your people still practice carrying a Vulcan's body and katra to the mountain?"

"It is tradition."

Vulcan traditions. Will they ever make sense? McCoy eyes Spock wearily. He sighs. It doesn't matter if they never make sense. This is important to Spock, to his identity as a Vulcan. "Alright Spock, I'll do it."

"Thank you." Spock's fingers caress his face, running gently along the back of his jaw and up towards his ears. "We have two minutes left. I will start the transfer now if you do not mind."

McCoy climbs out of Spock's lap. He presses Spock down by his shoulders so the Vulcan is lying in the bed. The doctor climbs up onto the bed beside Spock. Lying on his side, balancing delicately on the edge of the bed. As soon as he's comfortable, Spock raises his hands, stretching them out at awkward angles so he can remain on his back. It can't be comfortable, but he knows McCoy would rather have him on his back, than falling off the bed the moment he's passed. Leonard leans his head forward to meet Spock's hands. The Vulcan's hold is so tender as his fingers gently brush along McCoy's skin. They linger on McCoy's ring.

"Goodbye, Leonard."

It's too much. Hearing his name spoken so tenderly, with so much love, from someone who never says it. It's too much.

As his chest constricts and Leonard chokes on a sob, a new sensation joins the rest. It feels as if his whole body is being washed from the inside out. All of his pain and sadness are fed into him. The emotions grow as his frustration and self-hate diminishes. He would have described the feeling as a warm blanket being placed around his shoulders, but that's not right. It feels more like a hand has been reached out, lifting him up and away from a storm.

"Once again your need to use human metaphors to understand inherently non-human sensations fails to grasp the whole of what's happening."

Leonard can't laugh. His throat is too sore and dry. It's rubbed raw by all the sobs and cries he was holding back. Spock's katra, his soul, feels like a salve. It's powerful. As Spock's soul finds its way into Leonard's open wounds, it stings. They burn like scraped knees and adrenaline. The good sort of pain. Rough reminders that you're still alive.

If anyone had asked him to explain what a mind meld with Spock felt like, Leonard would have compared it to standing ankle-deep in calm, cool waters. There's always been some bumps here and there, but nothing worse than grains of sand scratching the soles of his feet.

This soul transference, katra sharing, mind meld thing, whatever in blazes it's called, is completely different. Instead of standing ankle-deep in a calm pond or lake, this was more like standing before a giant wave as the wind attempts to mercilessly knock you down. Despite all the force of the bond and the weight of Spock's soul, McCoy stays standing. He remains right where he's always belonged. Right by Spock's side. Stalwart through any wayward mission or turbulent emotions.

Always.

"Remember me, ashayam."

"I will, Spock. I will."

McCoy watches as the color slowly drains out of Spock's eyes. He tries not to weep as the intelligence fades. Spock is not gone. Not entirely. Leonard struggles to remind himself of that as the Vulcan's grip tightens, then disappears. His slow, barely noticeable breathing stops, and

the loud ringing of the life readings going flat begins.

As the strength in Spock's hand fades away, the door slides open once more. His long fingers attempt one last curl.

"Spock?" Jim's voice is frantic, terrified, as he runs over with Nurse Chapel beside him. "Spock!" Jim holds Spock's face, and McCoy realizes he had forgotten to alert the captain. So consumed with saying farewell, he had broken his promise. Damn it, he really can't do anything right.

"He's gone!" Chapel announces, angry and heartbroken.

A piece of Spock will carry on—quite literally—until he can get it to the mountain.

Somehow, that thought offers him no comfort. The whole of sickbay is cold and quiet, even as Jim and Chapel engage in frantic movement and animated conversation. Leonard slowly lifts himself off the bed. Jim is beside him. He can see the captain's lips moving, but his hearing has gone. Shock? From the grief or from the katra? His ring is still warm from Spock's touch.

So is his soul.

Jim is holding him. McCoy doesn't remember standing up. He must've fallen because Jim is practically carrying him somewhere. Chapel grabs a scanner and leads them towards a bed. The bed next to Spock's.

McCoy is lying down, eyes staring at Spock's body. He keeps expecting it to move, to twitch. He waits for the head to turn, eyebrow raised, and a glint in his eyes, Just waiting for a challenge. None of that comes to pass. Nothing happens.

Goodbye, Spock.

★✚★✚★

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Cake is Love made Edible

by Donrex

Life as a trainee doctor at Starfleet academy isn't too bad. *Strange*, for sure, but not *bad*.

Since starting out, Leonard learned how to recognise more than three hundred types of flu (most of them irrelevant if he planned to use that newfound knowledge on Earth when his time here ends, but that's neither here nor there). He can distinguish between twenty different internal organ systems, and name which species they belong to. Damn, he already assisted on surgery on some of them.

What he's trying to say here is that Starfleet Academy might be completely different than anything he ever did before, but aint that kind of the point? What does Jim always say? To bravely go … to … boldly go … or something?

Anyway, Leonard has decided to take each challenge with his arms open wide and his head held high and—

"Sorry, *what*?"

Leonard can't help the color flushing to his face as his back hits the corridor wall. Spock's arms are caging him between the wall and his body, palms mere inches from Leonards's flustered face.

"I said it is Jim's birthday today," repeats Spock.

"I *know* it's Jim's birthday today. How do *you* know it's Jim's birthday today?"

"He informed me of the date."

Leonard sighs, and takes a moment to lean against the wall Spock had cornered him into. He's about to ask *when* Jim told him that, considering it was the weekend, and when Leonard left the dormitory Jim was still in his bed with his mountain of pillows (two for his head, one to hug, one for his back and one for his legs. that kid was seriously high maintenance), and definitely did not seem communicative enough for this, but Spock clearly *does* know, and Leonard would love to get back to his own business sooner rather than later.

"Congrats, you know dates! Don't forget mine!" With that, he tries pushing off the wall and slipping under Spock's arm.

Spock has clearly anticipated this, as he effortlessly corners Leonard again.

"Okay, Spock, I can tell you're here for something, so why don't you just sp—"

Spock cuts him before he can finish his jab. "What's his favorite flavor?"

Leonard blinks once, twice, then bursts into laughter.

Spock watches him with a completely blank face as Leonard laughs, and coughs, and sets his hand on Spock's shoulder to stabilize himself, only to take it off the moment it makes contact with the fabric.

"Sorry, sorry, I'm not laughing at you. It's just … it's Sunday morning, and you corner me while I'm studying Ferengi reproductive organs for an exam I've been losing sleep over for a week now, and you—what, you're gonna make Jim a cake? With a little apron that says 'kiss the cook' and all?"

"The apron was not part of my plan," Spock deadpans, and it's almost enough to send Leonard into another fit of chortling.

"But the other part is? Are you actually planning on buying ingredients, and using an oven, and—and— he takes a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. "Oh, I *just* have to see that."

"I take it you are agreeing to assist me, then."

"You know what? Sure. I'm not giving this opportunity up for all the Ferengi sex in the world."

★✚★✚★

To Leonard's utter *delight*, Spock has done proper research on cake ingredients and the corresponding locations in which they are available throughout the city, which means he has the opportunity to witness Spock frown over a shelf with a selection of chocolate packages, pulling each and every brand out one at a time and reading the back as Leonard pushes a shopping cart behind him.

"It's just chocolate, Spock. No need for warp core science," he teases, leaning his forearms on the cart handle.

"I'm comparing nutritional values."

"It's *chocolate*, Spock," he repeats. "Just pick one and let's move on."

Spock ignores that comment, and continues to read the back on one of the packages. If this is how he'll go about each and every one of the ingredients, Jim could expect his cake to be ready in about a week—give or take.

Leonard's enthusiasm dampens in a curved line plummeting towards the X axis as Spock continues surveying chocolates, then milk, then flour.

He must draw the line at sugar.

"Spock, that's sugar."

"Indeed."

"This is a shelf full of sugar," he continues.

"An astute observation, Leonard," Spock answers in a monotone voice.

Leonard shifts his grip on the shopping cart. "You are not going to make me sit here and watch you read the labels of every single sugar brand, are you?"

Spock sets the bag of sugar down and turns to look at him. "Would it please you if we were to split the task between us?"

"No, because it still means we'll be here till closing time. Come on, we're switching." Leonard

leaves his spot from behind the cart and plucks the list out of Spock's hands. "Go on, you're on cart pushing duty."

Once Spock has taken his rightful place behind the cart, Leonard grabs a random bag of white sugar and sets it in the cart.

"But Leon—"

"Not a word from you! You asked for my help, didn't you? This is what that means." Leonard entangles his fingers on the metal bars of the cart, directing Spock to the next aisle.

Spock, wisely, doesn't complain about being demoted, but Leonard does catch him grabbing and checking labels of ingredients after they are set in the cart.

Well, as long as he's silent about it.

★✚★✚★

Leonard unlocks the door to his and Jim's dorm room, with Spock at his back with an armful of groceries, and it's only then that it dawns on him the full absurdity of the situation.

"Jim?" he calls into the hopefully empty flat, and both he and Spock hold their breath waiting for a response. "Alright, he's probably off somewhere. Put everything on the counter."

Despite the increased risk of discovery, Leonard and Jim's kitchen was the better equipped one for cooking—and by extension, baking. The Starfleet-issued kitchens in most flats were limited to a replicator and some counter space with a sink, but Leonard, stubborn as he is, insisted on buying a proper stove and toaster-oven, as well as other kitchen necessities his mother would have a heart attack over if he didn't possess. He was good at making himself eggs on his stove and pasta for dinner, but baking was … a bit out of his realm of knowledge. His mother was wonderful at it, and Spock was certainly the type of man who follows recipes to the letter, so they should have nothing to worry about—probably.

"Alright." Leonard rubs his hands together as Spock pulls the ingredients out of their bags and sets them neatly on the counter. "I think I have my Ma's old chocolate cake recipe saved in one of my PADDs, so I don't mess my kitchen up while I look for it."

He waits for Spock's affirming nod before heading towards his side of the room.

Leonard wasn't a messy man, per se, just … a busy one. He didn't enjoy having his shit all over the place, but he never really had the time to fix it. He hated Jim's side of the room even more, since that man was chaos incarnate, but until Leonard himself would pick everything up, his complaining rights were revoked.

That said, going through his things while knowing Spock could see the mess is … harrowing. Not that he cares what Spock thinks, of course. He pulls out a PADD from one of the drawers and looks for the recipe in question.

Hmm, not here.

He sets it aside and picks another, going through its contents.

Well that's worrying.

He only had one more PADD, and it's the one he uses for studies. The chances of a family recipe to be in there are slim, but he tries anyway.

Ah, fuck.

"I can't find it," he confesses as he enters the kitchen again, leaning against the counter.

"That is most unfortunate. I could try and message my own mother for her recipe, but with the time difference she would not receive my inquiry until she wakes up in a few hours."

Leonard already has a retort on his tongue when the words sink in. "Wait—your mom made you chocolate cakes? That can't be healthy for a Vulcan."

Spock looks over the counter at everything they've bought, and if Leonard thought Spock was capable of it, he'd say Spock looks rather bashful.

"She had used the equivalent replacement from Vulcan, and only gave me very small quantities of real Earth chocolate, as was appropriate for my frame and stature at the time," Spock explains.

Leonard hums in approval, following Spock's gaze to the counter. "Well, maybe we could wrangle something together, since we've both seen our mothers do this before."

Spock seems skeptical, but chooses not to raise his concerns, and so Leonard decided to busy himself by replicating measuring cups and mixing bowls for their disposal.

"Alright," he murmurs to himself, setting up a baking tray next to the small oven. "Can't be too hard, can it?" He's not sure which one of them he's talking to.

"With joint effort, I am certain we are capable of making a cake," assured Spock. Again, whether he was talking to Leonard or himself was unclear.

Leonard nodded, heading to the sink to wash his hands, while his eyes traced over the items on the counter one by one.

"Well, it would be the most *logical*," he sneaks a glance over to Spock as he says it, "that we start with the dry ingredients, and mix the others in later on."

Spock seemed to agree with his judgment, as he moved to rearrange the ingredients into two groups.

Leonard sets the replicated appliances on the counter, and reaches for the oven. Two hundred degrees Celsius feels about right, and he remembers his mother used to do it first, to let it preheat.

Once that is out of the way, he grabs the bag of flour. That seems like the safest place to start, considering it's supposed to be one of the main components of most baked goods. Two cups, maybe? That sounds like more than enough, and they could add more if necessary. He holds onto both edges of the plastic and tugs them apart, but they don't budge. He switches his grip and tries again, the plastic stretching under his fingers but refusing to give. He huffs and glances Spock's way, briefly considering entrusting the task to his Vulcan strength and calling it a day, before frowning and trying again. The plastic ripples as it stretches, but nothing more.

"Leonard—" Spock interjects, having noticed his struggle.

"I got it," he grumbles, and reaches to tear at it with his teeth instead. There's a bit of a tug, but Leonard persists, only for the bag to burst open with a sudden *humph*, and a cloud of flour exploding into his face.

He sets the bag back on the counter, coughing, and sends Spock a dirty look.

"Shut up," he warns, before Spock has even opened his mouth. Not that he needs to. Leonard knows Spock well enough by now. He knows the tilt of his head—however subtle—conveys concealed amusement, and his quirked eyebrow a silent 'I told you so.' "And wipe that smile off your face, or you're next," he threatens, both of them knowing Spock's lips haven't so much as twitched, but only one of them pretending to know its true meaning.

"You could have simply replicated a pair of scissors," says Spock, evidently neither shutting up nor keeping his infuriating hindsight to himself.

"Yeah, well, then I'd have a pair of scissors laying around here, and I haven't child proofed this room from Jim yet," he retorts casually, dusting his shirt of flour. It doesn't clean it as much as smear the white powder down his front, and that's before he even tried doing something about

his flour covered face.

Spock doesn't answer that, but Leonard knows he appreciated the joke, in his own Vulcan way. The fact that he didn't try to disprove that claim with logic is enough proof for him.

"I suggest, in that case, you leave the handling to me," he offers, something between a peace offering and another jab.

"Watch it," murmurs Leonard, giving up on cleaning himself up and grabbing the now open bag to fill the measuring cup. "Crack open the sugar and the cocoa powder while you're at it."

Spock complies, going through each item and methodically tearing as clean of an opening into the packaging as he can with his fingers. Leonard finds his eyes drifting back to them over and over.

Two cups of flour. How much sugar would that be? two spoons? maybe 3? But there's also the sugar in the chocolate and the cocoa to consider … two spoons sound about right.

He drags the sugar closer, and digs the spoon into it once, twice. He then eyes the bowl with his lower lip between his teeth. It fills his mouth with flour.

"The baking powder comes in prearranged masses," comments Spock, handing him a small packet of it. Thank fuck, thats one less guess for them to make. He dumps it all in.

"Right, what else?" He reaches for the cocoa powder at the same moment as Spock leans forward to push it towards him. The tips of their fingers brush together, just barely, but it's enough to send a jolt through him from head to toe.

They both leap back in opposite directions, their eyes locked together. It's not that—it's not that Leonard *minded*, or anything. It's not about the mind-reading, no matter how much Jim may tease him for it.

Jim has no problem touching Spock, accidentally or not. Leonard sometimes jokes to himself that their brains are synchronized, so by now the touches between them doesn't mean—well, *that*—anymore. When they exchange glances in front of him, he can never tell whether they are *just* glances, or something more.

And Leonard doesn't mind not having that! It feels a bit … invasive, when it's not deliberate. For him and Spock alike. He knows Spock's mind is as personal as his own is to himself, and he wouldn't dare go snooping around where he wasn't invited.

He prefers it this way, actually. He prides himself in having learned Spock's mannerisms to a point. In knowing to read him without taking anything he wasn't freely granted. It's more gratifying, in a way.

Like now, he can see the surprise of the touch clear as day in the slight gape of Spock's mouth. He doesn't look upset or alarmed, which is a relief, but it takes them both a moment before they can relax again.

"Sorry—" says Leonard, just as Spock says, "My appol—" and they both relapse to the tense silence.

Leonard lets his eyes drift across Spock's face, slowly lowering the hands he instinctively raised in surrender. He clears his throat for good measure, and turns back to grab the cocoa.

". . . Yes, uh … we should try figuring out how much milk we'll need for two cups of flour. And maybe check on the oven, while we're at it."

Spock hums in agreement, and gives Leonard a large berth as he circles him towards the oven.

Leonard, for his part, grabs a replicated whisk, and tries not to overthink it too much.

The heavy silence makes a reappearance as they each stick to their individual tasks. Leonard

finds himself clenching and slackening his jaw every few seconds, trying to think of something to lighten the mood.

"I presume it would make sense for the flour-milk ratio to be about three to two," says Spock at last.

Leonard nods, pushing the measuring cup his way. "I put in two cups, so …" he doesn't bother finishing the calculation, knowing Spock's completely capable of such a simple fraction.

Spock nods, and reaches for the milk, once again taking the long way around Leonard.

Ugh, he fucked something up didn't he.

Instead of asking, he busies himself with cracking two eggs into the mix, and takes a step back for Spock to pour the milk in as well. There's something even more unnatural about the eggshells they are walking on than the goddamn mind-reading nonsense, and the weight of the things unsaid is getting heavier and heavier as Leonard whisks the mixture into a rocky, bumpy slime.

"Would you start on the chocolate topping?"

Spock nods, and grabs a pack of chocolate.

"Turn on the stove—it's the button on the right." He turns to look as Spock reaches for a button. "Not that one. Below it. Bottom right. Sorry."

Spock nods and reaches for the correct button, and waits patiently for the stove to heat up.

Leonard pours his chunky sludge of cocoa mix to the baking tray, and sets the whisk to Spock's head level.

"Taste it," he orders.

"Leonard, I believe your taste buds would be a much more efficient—"

"Hell no. You orchestrated this idea, you taste this mess of a cake. Come on, you're an adult. You can handle a little sugar."

Spock opens his mouth to argue, and Leonard shoves the whisk into his hand. "I'm grabbing you a pot for the chocolate. Taste this before we put it in the damn oven."

He steps away to open the cupboard, but not before giving Spock a stern look.

"I believe we did not add a sufficient amount of sugar," Spock determines, and reaches for the sugar pack next to the tray.

"Add it till it tastes right, then," he grumbles, reaching for the smallest pot at the top of the stack, just out of reach. He curses under his breath and stands on his tiptoes, but even then his fingers only graze the handle.

He considers calling Spock for help, but he can hear him pouring sugar and mixing it behind him, and decides to prevail.

He tries jumping, but can immediately tell it's a terrible idea and abandons that effort in favor of climbing on the counter.

"It now tastes … considerably sweeter," he can hear Spock concluding from behind.

"Put it in the oven then," he mutters, focusing on grabbing the pot without losing his balance. When he turns his head to watch though, Spock is staring right at him.

"Are you certain this is safe, Leonard?"

"Its fine, I'm just grabbing the damn po—oooh—"

Note to self, thinks Leonard as he slips from the kitchen counter holding a heavy iron pot, *don't wave things around when trying to keep your balance, especially in front of someone like Spock, of all people.*

Fortunately, the pot has no chance of hitting Leonard's head, and thankfully Leonard's head

misses the opportunity of being acquainted with the floor as strong arms wrap around him to stop his fall.

Strong arms, is the first thought in his mind after he realizes he's still conscious, followed by, *Oh fuck, I hope he didn't hear me think that.*

"Leonard?" Spock asks carefully. Something about him is looser than he was just a moment ago, and if Leonard's heart wasn't beating at a thousand miles per hour, he might have thought to tease him about getting buzzed on sugar so quickly.

"Spock … oh lord, I thought I was a goner for a second there," he breathes, looking up at him.

Spock's hold on him tightens ever so slightly, and he says nothing.

"Hey, Spock? About earlier, with the cocoa, I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

Spock sets him back on his feet, but seems reluctant to let go of him completely just yet.

"I suggest we heat up the chocolate and put the tray in the oven," he says, looking over at the still-working stove. His words and body language tell completely different stories, and Leonard is unsure which one he should believe.

Leonard detaches himself and hurries over to set the pot over the heat and throw the chocolate bar in. Parallel to him, he can see Spock setting the cake mixture in the oven.

"We don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to," Leonard finally points out when their respective tasks are dealt with.

"On the contrary, Leonard. I was simply talking out of efficiency."

Leonard leans against the counter and crosses his arms. "Right, well, as I was saying, I know touching people must be a nightmare for you. It's not ideal for me, and that's without the whole touch telepathy business."

Spock tilts his head at him, then leans on the counter opposite him. "While your assumption is correct and your worry appreciated, you were acting on two false presumptions." He raises his fisted hand, and Leonards's eyes are drawn to the movement involuntarily. "One, is that I am not in control of my ability, and do not have mental shields on to protect me." One of his fingers draws up as he talks, and Leonard is so busy taking in this new information he barely notices Spock stepping closer. "Two," says Spock, putting another finger up, "you are not *people*. Whoever people are, you were never one of them."

Leonard inhales sharply, suddenly choking on air. He takes a gulp of air, then another, and only then he dares trying to meet Spock's eyes again.

"Careful, Spock. One might get the wrong idea when you say things like that."

Spock hums, taking another step towards him, and this time, Leonard couldn't possibly miss it, since it leaves them inches apart.

"And what might that wrong idea be?" At Leonards's refusal to answer, he adds, "That you might like my *strong arms*?"

And if Leonard was flustered beforehand, the right word for this new emotion would be mortification.

"I gave you the decency of privacy, Spock," he mutters, but it's a bit breathless, and doesn't sound quite as outraged as Leonard might've liked. "You should at least grant me some in return."

"And if I don't want you to be decent with me?" Spock answers smoothly, both his fingers still raised between them, a silent invitation.

Leonard might not be an expert on Vulcan culture, but *this* gesture? This one he knows. He remembers a late drunken night with Jim, spread out on their beds. He remembers Jim pressing

his fingers to Leonard's and saying, "Like this, but it feels *different*."

And fuck, it *was* different.

It felt like chocolate and summer days in the sun and the safety of an embrace with a loved one. It felt like being *seen*, and those sensations made his skin itch.

". . . Shit," he murmurs, pulling away.

Spock raises an eyebrow.

"A good 'shit,'" he hurries to clarify, knowing he's only making it worse.

"Indeed," replies Spock, and Leonard doesn't need touch telepathy to notice his amusement.

"Oh, shut up and kiss me the human way already." Leonard grasps onto Spock's shirt, and pulls him in.

This kiss is decisively less romantic, both for the flour covering Leonard's face and the desperate way he feels his way up from Spock's shirt to his face.

The spark is still there, that irresistible itch, but this time, Leonard knows how to chase it.

And fuck, now that he has Spock in his hold, its hard to let go.

So he kisses Spock softly. He kisses Spock roughly. He grabs onto his hair and leads Spock's hands to his hips and his mind is spinning.

Am I dreaming? he wonders to himself, and Spock, that impious bastard, whispers "You are wide awake, ashayam."

He wants this to last forever, with Spock's smooth skin and the vague taste of sugar and the sound of Spock's breaths and the smell of burning chocolate and—

Wait a fucking second.

"The cake!" Leonard exclaims, pushing Spock away and running for the stove. *Fuck.* "Fuck!" What was supposed to be molten chocolate is now a scorched sticky black substance stuck to the bottom of the pot. Forget using it as topping. How the fuck is he going to clean this mess?

He spins around to head for the oven, where Spock is already pulling the tray out. The cake seems to be in a similar state to the topping.

"Maybe the middle part is still edible?" he asks, but even while he says that it feels like a lost cause. Nonetheless, Spock sets the tray on the counter and reaches for a knife.

Leonard paces as Spock carves out piece after burnt piece, glancing to and away from the cake like a patient that clearly isn't going to make it.

"Did we buy extra chocolate? We have to at least try and conceal the charred taste," he asks neither of them in particular. He doesn't wait for an answer before starting to dig through the cabinets in hope of finding Jim's secret sweet stash (he knows he fucking has one).

Spock sets the knife aside and starts digging through the shopping bags on the counter. When he pulls out a second pack of chocolate, Leonard fears he might start crying from relief. "Oh, I could fucking kiss you right now!" he shouts, reaching for it.

"As much as I find it agreeable, that is what forced us into this predicament," Spock points out, and Leonard feels much better about not kissing him already.

This time, he lets Spock pull a pot out, and the two of them watch the chocolate melt like damn hawks. when Leonard asks Spock to taste it, he doesn't even complain (although maybe this taste test wasn't as important as the last). As soon as it has all melted, they pour it over the cake, (whatever's left of it, that is,) and only *then* Leonard turns to Spock, and pushes him against the counter.

★✚★✚★

Spock hears the key turning in the keyhole only a few seconds before Leonard does, but by then, it's already too late.

Jim sets his keys and bag down as Leonard scrambles to a safe distance, looking so guilty even being on a different continent from Spock won't save him.

"Well, well, well," says Jim, grinning like a damn Cheshire cat. "Now what could this gathering possibly be about?"

"It's not what you think—" blurts Leonard, while Spock says, "The gathering's purpose is preparations for your birthday."

"Checks out. That's definitely the gift I asked for." Leonard rolls his eyes as Jim looks the both of them up and down, ignoring the blood that is rushing to his face.

"That was not the intention," clarifies Spock, grabbing the cake and holding it out for Jim to see. "We made you this cake."

Jim's eyes drop to the cake, and with it the teasing smile. He stares at it for an alarming amount of time in utter silence.

"Actually, *we* didn't make shit. *You* made this … thing." Leonard says, pointing at Spock in an accusatory manner. "I have absolutely no hand in creating that abomination."

"On the contrary, Leonard. You've been thoroughly involved in the making process of this cake."

"I was only here for moral support!"

"That is a false—"

"Anyway, Spock made you a cake, Jim—" Leonard turns to Jim, only to find two streams of tears rolling down his red face. "Jim? Are you crying? Fuck, Spock, did we put nuts in this cake?" He turns to Jim again. "Are you having an allergic reaction?"

Jim smiles at the both of them, tears rolling down his cheeks like a goddamned ghibli character.

"You made me a cake," he repeats.

"Well, like I said, *I* didn't—"

"You *baked* me a cake. With real flour and real eggs and real sugar, and—and …" he starts crying even harder.

Leonard glances at Spock, who seems just as shocked as Leonard feels.

"Ah … yeah. I guess we did," Leonard says, studying Jim carefully.

"I can't wait to try it. I bet it's delicious."

And there were the three of them, hovering over Leonard and Jim's kitchenette counter and watching as Jim shovels spoon after spoon of cake into his mouth (he didn't even bother cutting it to pieces beforehand, that heathen). Usually, Leonard would've stopped him from eating an entire cake on his own, (and he sure is on his own. Spock already got drunk enough to sing Happy Birthday with him, and Leonard was around when that disaster was made. He won't have it anywhere near his mouth even if it was for the end of all despair), but the cake is so damn small after they cut the burnt parts off, and it *is* his birthday after all, so if the man wants to eat an entire shitty cake over a kitchen sink, so fucking be it.

Jim straightens up, lets the spoon clatter onto the empty plate, and uses his sleeve to once again try and dry his face to no avail.

"God, I think this is the best birthday cake I ever ate."

Leonard glances at Spock one more time, then heaves out a sigh, smiling softly.

"Happy birthday, Jim."

WE GO TOGETHER ZINE COMMITTEE

This zine would not have been possible without the diligent support and cooperative efforts of our Zine committee. Thank you all! Your hard work, time, effort, and invaluable contributions have made this zine a success.
Working with as many people as we did, we received the combined voices, hours, and ideas of us all to move this zine forward. As our zine is so fittingly themed: we go together, or not at all.

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